

EX LIBRIS



HERBERT F. ADLER

Edith H. Eckart.

op

1st Answered

104



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

<https://archive.org/details/devil0000neum>

The Devil

Fiction

ROOTED IN HISTORY

DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

by Willa Cather

QUIET CITIES

by Joseph Hergesheimer

THE DAYS OF THE KING

by Bruno Frank

THE NINTH THERMIDOR

by M. A. Aldanov

THE DEVIL

by Alfred Neumann

SWORDS ON THE SEA

by Agnes Danforth Hewes



The Devil

BY ALFRED NEUMANN

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
HUNTLEY PATERSON



m c m x x b i i i

NEW YORK · ALFRED · A · KNOPF



COPYRIGHT 1928 BY ALFRED A. KNOFF, INC.

Originally published as

Der Teufel

Copyright 1926 by Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt

Stuttgart

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

Book One

1 · 3

2 · THE NECKERS · 17

3 · THE TOUCHSTONE · 36

4 · THE SATYR · 50

5 · THE CIRCLE OF THE NIGHT · 72

6 · THE SOUL'S STRUGGLE · 88

7 · THE FALSE ST. DENIS · 109

Book Two

1 · ALTER EGO · 157

2 · THE CAGE · 174

3 · HUSBAND AND WIFE · 199

4 · THE HEADS · 222

5 · THE EARTHLY BOUNDS · 253

Book Three

1 · THE ANIMALS · 283

2 · THE GREAT ENEMY · 305

3 · THE CONQUEROR · 327

4 · THE GALLOWS · 349

BOOK ONE

Chapter I

G HENT was not a virtuous town. When the young Duke, already famous as the Count of Charolais, made his joyous entry into it after the coronation celebrations in Brussels, the rebellious spirit of its people was barely lulled. They had forgotten nothing, and suffered this strange mating of hospitality and extortion, homage and violence, God and the Devil, without asking any questions. From the towers of St. Jacob and St. Bavon the bells chimed forth their greeting and their defiance in one unbroken peal.

The Duke's attendants formed a goodly company, but a throng of armed men ten times as large had collected on the market-place, and as the Duke rode slowly through the crowd, they greeted him with calm gravity. He did not acknowledge their salutations.

"There are too many pikes and spears about," he observed to the Count of Crèvecœur at his side.

An armed body of patricians was paraded in front of the town hall, and from their midst the Chief Magistrate uttered a few words of formal welcome. As he did so, however, the sounds of confusion and disorder grew so loud and insistent in the neighbouring streets that the Duke interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"What is the meaning of that?" he demanded.

"It is the procession of the Fools of St. Lieven," replied the magistrate, quite unperturbed.

"'Pon my soul, it is singularly noisy and comes at a most untimely hour," said the Duke, turning in his saddle. As he spoke, the head of the procession entered the market-place in the rear of the Duke's party. The dazzling June sun sparkled on the pikes and polished helms.

"Surely, your worship," the Duke exclaimed, without averting his gaze from the spectacle, "surely these fellows are wearing a mighty lot of armour!"

"Only in accordance with the time-honoured customs and traditions of our town, your Highness," the other rejoined.

To the right of the priest who bore the shrine containing the relic of St. Lieven, there strode the Devil.

"Daniel," he said to a broad-shouldered man on his left, "the beloved Saint knows his way quite well."

The man nodded and laughed. Both he and the Devil pressed heavily against the priest, so that their arms and shoulders cramped his movements, which were in any case hampered by the shrine he was carrying, and they then proceeded to push him with all their might towards the offices of the *Cueillotte*, which stood in the market-place only a few yards in front of them, where the Duke's agents collected the octroi duties on corn. The next moment the reliquary struck the frail woodwork of the building, and the Devil, turning round and raising his thin, long and slightly bent body to its full height, and throwing up his arms, cried out in a piercing voice:

"Friends, the holy Saint would fain go through the house without bowing his head!"

Instantly there darted from the procession men with ram-heads, men with crowbars, and men with axes, and, uttering loud yells, they flung themselves on the offices of the *Cueillotte*. A few minutes later the procession stamped across the ruins of the building, shouting "Ghent's own rights! Ghent's ancient rights!" and rolled on towards the centre of the market-place. The armed men that occupied it were driven towards the town hall and, whether purposely or not, formed a broad belt surrounding the Duke and his party.

The prince bit his lips and, with a rapid glance, observed the pale faces of his suite, the placid bearing of the town councillors, and the unbroken wall of armed men that had drawn closely round him. In measured tones he addressed the chief magistrate.

"Your Worship seems not to be astonished at the sudden political turn this religious demonstration has taken?"

The old man stared him out. "No, your Highness," he replied.

The Duke was silent for a moment, then, rising in the saddle, he cried out in a loud voice:

"We thank the worshipful councillors of our good city of Ghent for their reception. We come in order to give ear to just grievances and claims. We are ready to meet all petitioners in the town hall."

The proceedings lasted six days, and for six days the Duke remained the prisoner of the townsfolk in arms. On the first day he agreed to abolish the *Cueillotte*; on the second he consented to throw open the three gates of the city which had been closed; on the third he restored to the seventy-two guilds the right to their forbidden ensigns, and seventy-two banners already fluttered in the market-place; on the fourth he granted the town the right to elect its own syndics; on the fifth he granted amnesty to all those who had flouted the ducal supremacy; and on the sixth he allowed civic commissaries to be appointed to control the officials of the ducal government. Thus were Ghent's ancient privileges restored.

Whereupon the people formed a lane across the market-place and cheered the Duke and his attendants to the echo as they at last withdrew from the town.

The Devil, whose name was Oliver Necker, was a burgher of Ghent and Master of the Guild of Barbers. But he was too shrewd to claim the same rôle at the proceedings in the town hall as that which he had chanced to play for St. Lieven. For he bore in mind that rumour had long ascribed to the Duke of Charolais an extraordinary memory for faces, so much so that even after a lapse of years his Highness was wont, if occasion arose, to hand over to his Provost all manner of persons who might once have given him cause for offence. And Oliver was convinced not only that the Duke still retained this gift of his heir-apparent days, but also that he would not lack opportunity for exercising it.

Thus it came to pass that when they had escorted St. Lieven up to the offices of the *Cueillotte* and the procession had trampled across the ruins of the building, Master Oliver and Daniel Bart, his assistant, were no longer to be seen. And that is why Oliver's charming and beautiful young wife illuminated the gloomy council chamber of the Guilds, as well as the wooden face of their President, by announcing that poor Oliver had caught a sudden chill, and begging the eloquent Master of the Guild of Tanners in her husband's name to represent the interests of the Barbers before the Duke in the matter of the banners. The radiance of her eyes as they rested on Jehan Copenhelle, the tanner, sent a secret thrill through his frame, and Pieter van Eecke, the President, doffing for a moment the stiff demeanour of age and dignity under the gleam of her white

teeth, expressed the thanks of the community to Master Oliver for the true Ghentish spirit he had displayed and the faithful manner in which he had carried out the preconcerted plan. Then, bending unexpectedly across the table, and stroking the young woman's bare arms in fatherly fashion, he concluded by wiping the moisture from the corners of his mouth. The moment the barber's fair wife had gone, however, and the seventy-one men could no longer contemplate the grace and glory of her form, the hall was once more given over to their gloomy deliberations.

Meanwhile Master Oliver was busy shaving a fat cloth merchant, who spoke but little and appeared to be struggling to keep awake. The barber observed him intently, noticed that his eyes were gazing very wakefully beneath their grey lashes, and, as if to judge of the smoothness of his shaven skin, laid a hand on his customer's fat cheek for an instant. His left hand felt a wagging tongue beneath the flesh, and recognising a signal, he quickly drew himself up to his full height in order to take stock of the men to whom Daniel and his other assistant were attending, and of those who stood outside the open shop arguing over the stirring events of the day. He shook his head, while the merchant, now busy with a towel, watched him closely. At length the sound of a deep voice in the street drowned the hum of squabblers at the door.

"Friends, friends, how shortsighted and foolish you are! The Duke has not yet said either yea or amen, and, should he be compelled to do so, his word would not endure for long. And even if he really meant honestly by us, we should at best only fall out of the frying-pan of Burgundy into the fire of France."

Oliver caught the merchant's eye and winked faintly; then, lifting up his harsh, high-pitched voice, he shouted out into the street:

"Hi, Pieter Heuriblocq, when do you expect the Duke to make you his tax-gatherer?"

A short-legged, broad-shouldered man broke away from the group in front of the shop, and, looking gravely up at the Master, said:

"When the King of France has made the Devil his barber."
Daniel Bart laughed uproariously.

"Then the most Christian Fox might well be tricked in true Ghentish fashion!"

Amid the laughter that followed this remark, Oliver leant quickly towards the merchant and said as carelessly as possible:

"You have some samples of cloth for me, dear sir, haven't you?"

The portly merchant stood up, yawned, and, stretching himself, nodded. Oliver continued in a low voice:

"Go out and turn to the left and you'll find the door of the house in the side street. Walk straight in!"

He brushed his customer's coat down and said over his shoulder:

"'Struth, Pieter, 'twere better for our town to be a Devil in France than an advocate for Brussels. And a man should only be prepared to risk his neck when he has the brains to make the game safe. So we two cannot hope to understand each other, especially as I cannot ease your mind about your drafts on Bruges and Liége, but can only relieve your chin of its bristles. So come here and sit you down!"

The other man laughed approvingly. Heuriblocq, with a shrug of his shoulders, moved awkwardly forward to obey the summons, and the fat merchant had meanwhile reached the street. As he was lathering his new customer's chin, Oliver whispered to him:

"Let me give you a piece of sound advice, friend Pieter. In these mistrustful times, keep a sharp look-out on your tongue. I don't mind telling you that you are already suspected by one of the magistrates of being an agent of the Duke's. Now you know what their suspicion means. So be careful."

The man cast a fleeting glance at the speaker and was silent.

A moment later even the men outside the shop became quiet, and when Oliver looked up he saw that they were all looking in the same direction and smiling. He smiled, too, for he knew what their bright faces meant. His fair one had come. She had vouchsafed the scores of eyes just one glance at her lovely features, had acknowledged the greetings of the multitude with a curt word or two, and was now entering the shop. Oliver's thin lips, the hard lines of his face, and his pitiless deep-set eyes, so vague and uncertain in shade, and so piercing

that hardly anyone could bear to look into them — Oliver's whole expression softened, and grew kindlier, younger, warmer, ay, and sunnier and brighter to boot, as she approached him.

"All goes well," she said with a smile.

In an instant the room seemed to fill with light. The men stared intently after her, and those at the door of the shop, together with the customers, all bibbed and lathered, betrayed by a faint gleam of their teeth the joy they felt as they followed her every movement. Even the assistants did not withhold their humble worship, and Daniel Bart's face was drawn into a grimace at once lewd and respectful. Meanwhile her bare back, accustomed to the encomiums and secret longings of eyes that had wandered from her face, seemed, in the low-necked dress she wore, to be returning its thanks. For there was an imperceptible though maddening shimmer on her skin, as if it were conscious of being observed. But the man before her, Oliver himself, was in a position to relish not only her own face but also the faces of the men behind her; and standing with his razor suspended in mid-air, he contemplated his wife and the scene beyond. Then in a trice he appeared to behold nothing but the vision that had suddenly sprung up before his mind, and he laughed aloud. It was a hideous laugh.

Whispering a word or two into her ear, he once more bent over Pieter, who, alone of all the men, had not stirred. At the same moment the young woman passed through the back of the shop into the house.

She discovered the strange merchant already installed in one of the rooms — the first he had found open — where he lay full stretched on the couch with the customary calm of portly people. He raised himself slowly to a sitting posture when he heard the sound of footsteps, and, the moment he saw it was Oliver's wife, he sprang to his feet as quickly as he could and greeted her with every sign of well-bred courtesy. "The Master will be here in a moment," she said, in friendly tones, and offered him wine. He drank her health and, after the manner of a man whose habits of life make him banish reserve in the presence of ladies, he gave free rein to his tongue. Oliver's wife, with her customary smile, listened attentively.

"Excuse me, sir," she exclaimed at last in gentle accents, "but when one wishes to play the part of a cloth merchant, one

should not be content with the disguise alone, one should also don the manners. And you ought to either curb your gallantry or else gather from what wits I show that I am my husband's confidante."

The man laughed in his throat.

"Since you rate the manners of respectable cloth merchants so low, madam," he said at length, "I am constrained, in order to please you, to acknowledge that I am not one. But you must forgive me if, for the moment, I let it rest at that, for my business is so difficult and weighty that I must leave it to the Master to explain it to you."

"Oh, my dear sir," she protested, "I may be inquisitive, but I have no wish to learn your business. It is enough for me to know," she added, leaning over to him across the table and speaking almost in a whisper, "it is enough for me to know that the great King no longer sends us low vagabonds, gypsies, travelling journeymen, or money-changers, but one of his own courtiers. . . ."

Taken by surprise, the man started back. His face had grown purple.

"Enough, madam! Your wits seem to be no less dangerous than your beauty." Then, observing her thoughtfully, he added: "They ought certainly to take you a long way in this world!"

Her large grey eyes scanned the distance absently, and their pupils dilated.

"Only as far," she muttered slowly and almost inaudibly, "only as far and no farther than our own Master wishes."

The man clasped his hands as if overcome by unusual excitement.

"Our King?" he gasped.

"No."

"God?"

"No."

"Then you must be thinking of the Devil?"

She made no reply, but closing her eyes for a moment or two, remarked at length: "Here he comes!"

"I hear nothing!"

"I know."

The man pressed a hand to his brow and gazed distractedly about the gloomy room. It was but scantily furnished, but the

furniture was large and heavy. He coughed as if wishing to throw off the oppression he felt. A door was heard to slam, short, quick footsteps followed, and Oliver stood in the doorway. His wife laughed.

"This gentleman," she said, "will not confide his particular methods of weaving to anyone but you, though not because he is mistrustful, but only because he is too polite. You have yet to learn that the cloth merchants of France behave very much like courtiers."

Their eyes met. Oliver's brows were raised enquiringly. Then, with a courteous motion of his hand, he turned to the cloth merchant, and in tones of great gravity observed:

"My lord, in all possible concerns, even in that which brings you here, my wife enjoys my most complete confidence, and, what is more, she deserves it. Let this be your security for speaking quite openly in her presence. So you have come . . ." he checked himself and averted his glance a moment—"but perhaps you would feel more at ease if we were alone?"

As the merchant seemed to hesitate, Oliver motioned to his wife to leave the room. And while the stranger was gesticulating and protesting none too convincingly, Anne smilingly remarked from the door:

"Ha! Oliver, you observe that people see us as two, and not as one!"

She closed the door softly. The Master contemplated his guest with an expression of polite expectation and seemed unwilling to open the conversation. The other deliberated until his manner and glance both recovered the assurance which, in the indistinct and almost uncanny lighting of the room, seemed essential to his comfort.

"Just one question before we start, Master Oliver," he began with obvious reserve. "Does anyone besides your wife know anything about our relationship, or of your work in the service of the King? I mean, do you work in conjunction with a sort of group, which I would regard as precarious and not in keeping with our policy, or are you, as I have hitherto supposed, quite alone?"

Oliver's lips grew if anything thinner than ever, and he spoke in measured tones.

"The King pays for my good work with good money. There is no other arrangement between us. As to the ways and means, that is my business. Why do you wish to know about them?"

The other did not answer at once, but tried to stare Oliver out. Then he said quietly:

"Maybe in the last few minutes much has struck me which only needs to be confirmed by you, in order to make me marvel at the shrewdness of my mighty master. Maybe, for instance, Master Oliver, the King is thinking of another arrangement which will be much more to your own and his advantage."

Oliver instantly raised his head.

"If I may be allowed to ask, who may you be, dear sir?"

"I am Jean de Beaune, one of the King's ministers."

Oliver laughed noiselessly.

"Lord of Beaune, and a minister of the King? I call that a modest way of speaking! Louis' active genius, who draws money from the people as Moses drew water from the rock with the staff of the Lord, might be allowed to speak of himself rather differently. Very well, then, I am honoured by such an ambassador, and his veiled questions and answers begin to interest me. And perhaps all you want is my assurance that I am as certain of the aim and as self-reliant in its pursuit as the great King himself. And, as it happens, I find the two genii which I have created for myself adequate for the purpose — Anne, who is both a woman and beautiful, and Daniel Bart, my foreman, my creature, who makes up in obedience and good muscle what he lacks in understanding. And so the great King seems not to have enough with the three wonderful Paladins of his genius — the Treasurer, the Hangman, and the Cardinal, who is so convenient both for good politics and guilty consciences. Nevertheless, I warrant my lord that I could guess whom he lacks."

Jean de Beaune had listened with tense excitement, and now shook his head gravely.

"Master, Master," he protested, "you are leading the talk into depths which at any other time and place might well take our breath away. But it was I who showed you the way, and now I have no wish to draw back. Who is it, then, that he lacks?"

Oliver pulled a wry face.

"What a pity it is you cannot answer that yourself, my Lord of Beaune; for it probably accounts for your visit here, and you heard the answer only a moment ago from the lips of a burgher of Ghent."

"That is just what I feared," interposed Jean de Beaune.

Oliver raised a deprecating hand. "All right," he continued, "I understand. We will discuss that in a minute. But for the moment let me answer your question, since you will have it so. When I say the King lacks a barber, I do not mean that barber need necessarily be Oliver. Were I to say that the King lacks Oliver, I should run the risk of being hated as a rival by you three who are his familiar spirits, or at least by the other two, who, to judge from their callings, are more dangerous than you. So let me help both yourself and me by saying simply that what the King lacks is a fourth who should attract neither admiration nor notice, whether as a finance minister or an executioner, or as a stiller of consciences. What he lacks is the Invisible One. I shall say no more. Convey this message to His Majesty, and marvel discreetly at his acuteness. I will do the same."

Jean de Beaune had risen from his chair and retreated a step or two.

"I am afraid of you," he said quietly, "and I have not often been afraid. Why do you not defend yourself, Oliver, against the name everybody gives you? Even the King calls you *Le Mauvais*."

The Master shrugged his shoulders and laughed hideously.

"It was I myself who invented the name, my Lord of Beaune. I have borne it for thirty years, and I am now six and thirty. Very seldom has it stood in my light, and often enough it has proved an advantage. And," he added with some irony, "if the Most Christian King calls me so, and yet gladly allies himself with me, the name is worth as much as any title to me, and any place in a strange mythology."

Both were silent for a moment. Jean de Beaune strode thoughtfully to and fro, and Oliver watched him closely.

"Is there any chance," the courtier enquired, "that the Duke's party in the town will spoil the success of the undertaking?"

"No," Oliver replied. "They are in the minority at pres-

ent, and therefore obviously dejected. Besides, their leaders are in custody. Not long ago I even thought of having that wine merchant Heuriblocq locked up — you know, the fellow whose jest seems to be troubling you still; for, after all, your question really concerns him, does it not, my dear sir? But the man is harmless, and it was only by chance that he hit the bull's-eye fair and square with his petty malice, which, if you kept your ears open, you must have known was only a reply to my piece of spite. If I had him locked up, he would only take himself, and perhaps his jest as well, more seriously than they are worth. When I lathered his face, I gave him a warning that ought, I think, to meet the situation.”

“But could you have him locked up?”

Oliver stared at him in astonishment.

“Surely, my lord, you are not so fussy or so incredulous still, as to wish me to give you a proof, are you? Are you going to pay attention to a foolish jibe which, as things are, any schoolboy could fling and be certain to raise a laugh?”

Jean de Beaune stood still and stared down at the oak table which separated him from Oliver. Without looking up, he fumbled for his words.

“Certainly not, Master,” he rejoined thoughtfully. “Why should we bother about insignificant agitators? But we might be interested in your filling a certain outward and visible position of power, as a member of the municipal council; for, as a loyal and zealous burgher, you could certainly attain to this without creating suspicion, and you could turn it to active political account on our behalf, with the assurance of being able to take refuge with us if ever you were in personal danger.”

Oliver stretched out an arm and stroked the sleeve of the ambassador's coat with his long fingers — a gesture which evidently caused his companion some alarm.

“May I, Jean de Beaune,” he enquired, smiling cunningly, “beg you to tell me frankly whether this notion hails from the King or from yourself?” He waited a moment, and when he saw that the man could not summon up courage to reply, he added amiably and with a gesture full of grace, “Well, then, forgive me for having asked you, my lord, and allow me to tell you why the King, who, as far as I can see, thinks I am at the

beginning and not at the end of my career on earth, cannot have had any such idea. For if the politics of this town were to assume a still more pronounced French colour, and I were to stand forth publicly as one of the promoters of this, in six months, or even six weeks, the Duke would have me hanged, drawn and quartered on our own market-place or on the Grand Place in Brussels. And the duties of my public office would have been too heavy to have allowed me to flee to France at the right moment. Besides, even if I succeeded in my flight, the very instant it became known that the chief councillor had fled there would be an end to all stopping by the King's future barber, whose razors must be kept sharp without any noise. So you see," he added softly, and with a scoffing smile, "the King is right; for the present chief magistrate, with his politics influenced by me, would in like circumstances only run the risk of growing grey and dying a natural death in a dungeon — while I, if the worst should happen, would have enough time, without creating any scandal, to vanish over the French border, or — if the King did not want me — to go to Anjou, Castile, Milan, Venice or Florence, where my gifts would receive a friendly welcome."

Jean de Beaune rapped the table with some excitement, and leant towards Oliver. "Then you are convinced that the independence of Ghent has not been secured by your bold stroke to-day, and that when once the Duke has been allowed to go he will undo everything?"

"Of course he will try," said Oliver indifferently, "and of course he will succeed, and then, naturally, the town will rebel again, as sure as it has the spirit which it values in me." He regarded the courtier with great gravity and spoke with emphasis. "We cannot hope for final decisions, my lord, and the King will know that there is nothing final in politics. My business is to stir up masses so that they do not stagnate. I don't presume to be able to mould them."

"How long do you suppose they will be able to detain the Duke?" the other enquired in confusion.

"Hardly a week, unless the town wants war again. And it does not want war."

"Hardly a week," repeated the courtier, "and then he will be free again. . . ."

Once more both men were silent. Jean de Beaune went to the gloomy stained glass window and tapped its leaden tracery with his fingers, while Oliver, in a state of tense excitement, observed him closely. Then, as if he could no longer bear the suspense, he, too, rose from his chair, and went to stand close behind the ambassador. The latter turned round and remained facing the Master, and, as he moved, his shoulder grazed Oliver's arm. "And now what other question, what other question does the King want answered, my Lord of Beaune? What other assassin's question?"

The ambassador, nonplussed and with flushed cheeks, looked up into his face. Oliver retreated a step and then said very sternly:

"You can also tell the King that, if at some convenient moment the Duke happened to be shot dead by a certain arquebus — and I could easily press one into the hands of Daniel Bart, my assistant, to whom I am much attached — my wife, whom I love, and myself, for whose death I would make the King pay pretty heavily, would within an hour be hanging from the roof of the belfry. Nor would this expiatory sacrifice save the town from destruction. And even if the King did not mind if this one death led to hundreds of thousands of other deaths, which is quite possible, he must nevertheless acknowledge that I may feel some concern about my own life, and that of Anne, and of my assistant, and perhaps, also, about the life of my own town. The Duke's hour has not yet come. Fate is not going to make our great King's task as easy as all that."

Jean de Beaune continued to stare at the speaker, and his flabby cheeks trembled with excitement.

"And what if the King wished to know your reply, Master?" he enquired softly. Oliver laughed maliciously.

"You protect your master with great chivalry, my lord," he said. "Louis will most certainly have this reply if he cannot see his way to pay for the shot in question." Then, laughing loudly, he added:

"Do you think, Jean de Beaune, that I have passed my examination well?"

The ambassador rubbed his eyes. "It is I who have not passed it well," he muttered as if to himself.

On the day when the old privileges were restored to the town and the Duke left, the ambassador returned and handed Oliver five thousand silver dollars, offering him, at the same time, on behalf of his master, the post of Court barber and First Groom of the Chamber.

"I shall probably accept it very soon," said the Devil, with a smile.

Chapter 2

THE NECKERS

THE Neckers hailed from the village of Thielt, which lies to the west of Ghent and belongs to the municipal area of that town. They were either peasants, or else barber-surgeons, quacks, necromancers, spies and arch-roguers. For generations the men of the family had had red hair, bony features, and deep-set eyes, while the women had had smooth, unusually white and often pretty faces, and the inevitable red hair. The men usually married late, and took as wives very young women, chiefly Walloons, over whose fidelity they watched with extraordinary vigilance. Most of the women of the family vanished from sight in the towns of Flanders or northern France, where they lived as public harlots, or became concubines in the households of the great, without ever reminding their brothers, who seemed quite unconcerned about them, either of their relationship or even of their existence. Strange as it may appear, however, these same brothers frequently inherited all their property, which at times was by no means insignificant. Thus the family retained a certain shady prosperity which, while it was exhibited with some dignity and controlled with great prudence, provoked but little hostility among their fellow-villagers. What was also strange, moreover, was the fact that the suspicious and doubtful character of the Neckers had never led to the proscription or degradation of any one of them. The shrewd family policy which always made the eldest son the heir to the farm and the representative of middle-class respectability and social standards, and left the younger sons to adopt wanderers' callings, and thus to exploit their native demoniacal intelligence, earned for the Neckers a good deal of popular favour, despite the fact that one or another of the knowing brotherhood sometimes ended his days on a foreign gallows. And such was the remarkable discipline of the family that no Necker of Thielt had ever been convicted of a dishonourable action by the home authorities. Even among the

Neckers who settled respectably in Thielt, intellectual superiority over the rest of their fellow-villagers was so marked that, besides being openly recognised, it led to a kind of tradition which established them in the official posts of the community, so that ultimately the first-born among them became, as it were by right, the hereditary worthy of the place. The strange separation of the eldest member of the family from the destinies of his more adventurous brothers and sisters was at times only apparent, for he was always shrewd enough to maintain at least clandestine relations with his less reputable kith and kin. But his aloofness was such that his public life was never affected by the accidents that befell the rest of his family in their vagabond careers. Thus Oliver's grandfather, Gillis Necker, was mayor in the very year when his younger brother was executed in Orleans for poisoning a political enemy, and Oliver's father remained Mayor of Thielt and magistrate of the town of Ghent, despite the fact that his brother Karel was burned by the Roman Inquisition for practising black magic.

Oliver was Claes Necker's second son, and the youngest of his children. His father was sixty when he was born, and his unhappy mother thirty-five. His birth cost his mother her life — the life that meant so little to her. The clumsy midwife who attended her grazed her internally with a dirty finger-nail, and this set up blood-poisoning, from which she died. It was said that her whole body was so swollen at the time of her death that the flesh was as hard as wood. She complained but little during her illness, as little as her husband did after her death. She had seldom complained in her life, and seldom said no; she had only shown signs of weariness and dejection. This had been her only response to her husband's cruelty and the slavery of her existence. She was a quiet peasant girl from the province of Artois, too pretty not to attract attention, and too poor to be able to choose a man for herself. It was only by chance that she happened to be sold to Claes Necker. She suffered his passion and his blows, bore him children, kept house for him, secretly shrank with fear from the strange, wild creatures she had borne him, and grew ever more lonely, timid and wretched. While, however, she did her best to keep out of the old man's way, she denied him nothing. Soon she hardly knew whether she was still young or as old as the villain who was devastating her

body and soul with such unaccountable and persistent hatred — and she died gladly and without resistance, like a decrepit old woman.

Very soon afterwards Claes married the heavy-limbed, broad-hipped, twenty-year-old daughter of a burgher of Ghent, Eliza de Clerq, who, the moment she found herself a woman, astonished everyone by rousing herself from her lethargy, asserting her rights with vigour against the hostile confederacy of Claes' two daughters and the body of servants, and even daring to contradict her husband. For she was strong enough to be able to resist the old man's rage. Her step-son Henryk alone stood by her; but, like her, he was twenty years old, and clung to her with a sort of boorish attachment.

Oliver was a reserved child, and in his eyes there was a look of dark suspicion. He was incapable of gratitude, and felt no need of love. His stepmother's deep sense of duty compelled her to take care of him, but she did not like him, and often felt actually repelled by him, though this appeared to her so unjust and unreasonable that at times she would try to make up for it by loud and violent protestations of tenderness. But at such times the boy would lie as stiff as a log in her arms, and would draw his head back with a look of disgust. When he was five he returned such caresses with bites and scratches, but he never uttered a sound when she beat him. He never cried and never played with other children, but would creep silently about the house, breaking the windows and the crockery, cutting open the sacks of corn, putting soot and meal-worms into the flour, and perpetrating every kind of villainy with a sort of calm determination that never relaxed. He was hardly ever caught, and would watch others, whether men or beasts, being punished for his misdeeds, without stirring a muscle. But his great joy was to frighten people. He was fond of crouching in corners, cupboards and dark passages, and of springing out upon passers-by. He merged into the twilight, into every horror of the night, became one with each crooked trunk and every shadow cast by the foliage of the trees; and would spring from his concealment upon the terrified wanderer. He was always to be found where he was least expected, under beds, or behind corn sheaves, frightening slumberers and disturbing lovers, now shrieking like an owl, or uttering the cry of a dying man. Sometimes he would

be seen hanging like an executed felon, and anon he would haunt the apartments of young women like a house-breaker. The sight of his grimacing countenance — old, sallow, gaunt and vicious — surmounted by its shock of red hair, was alone enough to provoke terror or loathing. The servants called him the Devil.

Claes, his father, paid little heed to him, but would listen to no complaints about him, and was never known to strike him. Very often, when he knew he could not be seen, he would observe the boy from the dark recesses of a barn or from behind a door, always with feelings of the utmost kindness. Oliver appeared to be conscious of the old man's secret fondness for him, and whenever he was in his presence or anywhere near him, he was always a little more amiable, and assumed an air of serene innocence, the unreality of which was soon proved by a shake of his stepmother's head and a smile on his father's lips.

When Oliver was twelve years old the following incident occurred. He was caught trying to assault the daughter of one of the maid-servants, who was the same age as himself, and his stepmother bared his back and gave him a sound thrashing with a birch-rod. The boy buried his face in his left arm and dug his teeth deep into the flesh, but uttered never a sound. At this moment, however, Claes entered the room, and without saying a word, snatched the birch-rod from his wife's hand, and struck her so heavily over the head that she fell unconscious to the floor. Oliver turned round and stared in dumb astonishment at his father. Claes, with eyebrows slightly raised, bore his son's scrutiny for a moment, then, biting his lips, he turned sharply round, hurled the rod into a corner and left the room, slamming the door behind him. Oliver crouched beside the prone figure, gazed at the thin stream of blood that was slowly trickling down the parting of the woman's hair, and the blood that issued from her nose and ears. Then, bending his head gently towards her, he kissed away the blood that had begun to run down her forehead. Whereupon, suddenly springing to his feet, his face distraught with anguish, he ran to the water-butt, moistened a cloth, laid it on the woman's face, and rushed from the room. For the rest of the day nobody saw him. His brother Henryk alone volunteered the information that he was running about the linen-weavers' bleaching yards, and told his father as

much when he asked after him at the midday meal. But Henryk did not look his father in the face when he said this, and Claes asked no more questions. In the evening, with ashen features, a wild and harassed look, and exceedingly dirty, Oliver appeared at the common board where his parents, his brothers and sisters and the servants were all assembled, and, without greeting anybody, took his place. Claes ate fast and silently; Eliza, who sat by him and who was still rather pale and had dark rings under her eyes, observed the boy attentively without uttering a word of blame. When he had finished his meal, the father rose and left the room as usual. Henryk also left the table, solitary and reserved as ever, and as he went he cast a timid glance back into the room over his shoulder. His two sisters and the men and maid-servants followed, laughing and talking, and were lost in the mellow light. Oliver and his stepmother were alone. They remained seated at the table, a good distance apart, with the empty chairs between them, and looked each other in the face. Then suddenly she bowed her head beneath his burning gaze and blushed. He laid his arms on the table and clenched his fists.

"Oliver," she said gently, "was it you who put that cloth on my face?"

"No," he replied, between clenched teeth. After a while he stood up and strode towards the door. "Come," he said. But she hesitated.

"Come," he repeated peremptorily, looking at her with fevered eyes; "it is well worth while."

He gave a short laugh and stepped out into the yard. Both in his words and in his laugh there was a provoking knowledge of something which, horrible though it might be, roused her curiosity and made her obey. She followed him and caught him up at the gate. They strode silently together down the moonlit field-path into the coppice, where Oliver halted and whispered to her to take off her noisy clogs. They continued their way barefooted to the woodman's hut, from which a light was gleaming. Inside the woman could see Claes lying with Grietja Hawel, the fifteen-year-old maid-servant from Oudenarde, naked in his arms. She started back as if she were about to burst into the hut and raise the alarm. But Oliver, who was standing behind her, caught her in his arms, pressed his right hand to her mouth and

his left to her breast, and, with his face behind her, whispered excitedly the one word:

“Henryk!”

Utterly bewildered, she suffered his embrace for a moment, then she thrust the boy violently from her and hurried away. As luck would have it, she met Henryk along the lonely field-path, for he had been lying in wait for her behind a hay-rick. He caught her up in his strong arms, and she did not cry out or resist. He bore her panting into the field, muttering meaningless words as he went, and laid her gently on the ground.

OLIVER, as stiff as a post, stood waiting in the archway of the door, shining bright in the moonlight and blocking the entrance. First came Eliza. She was running as if she were being pursued, and started back at sight of the boy. Her breath came short and fast, and as she stared at him with large wide-open eyes, she tried to gather up her hair, which had fallen down over her shoulders. Oliver said not a word and not a muscle of his face moved. His eyes seemed so deep set in the white light of the moon that, to his mother, he looked as if the night had pierced through his head at two points and she could see through him into infinite darkness. She uttered a hoarse groan, and in a voice quite strange to him, asked: “Are you blind, Oliver?”

The boy did not reply, but he seemed to her to be grinning. She covered her eyes with her hand, pushed hard against the jamb of the doorway in order to avoid touching him, and passed by with short, frightened steps. He did not turn to look at her.

Next came Henryk, with arms swinging and back bowed. As he reached the door he raised his head, but did not seem particularly astonished at what he saw.

“Oh, Oliver!” he said sadly. But when he looked into the boy’s face he became agitated and stammered incoherently:

“I-I-I c-c-c-could not f-f-f-find her — Oliver, please. . . .”

He lowered his head, looked close into the boy’s eyes and suddenly — struck him in the face. Oliver staggered against the doorway. Henryk strode into the yard. Without uttering a note of pain or anger, Oliver shook himself and resumed his position.

For twenty minutes he waited till the stillness of the night buzzed in his ears. Now and again a dog barked and drunken

voices echoed from the village beyond. Oliver clenched his teeth, for all of a sudden he felt he was going to cry. But he did not cry. Then Grietje came along, a little song on her lips. Suddenly she exclaimed, "Mary, Mother of Jesus!" Then she went on repeating low and clear to herself:

"Devil!"

Claes followed, leaning slightly forward and taking his usual long strides. He stopped, taken aback.

"What are you doing here, Oliver?"

The boy gazed at him for some moments, and then said, in a slow, monotonous voice:

"There is blood again on the birch-rod, and Grietja has come in."

Claes looked beyond him, his lips slightly parted, then leant against the wall as if suddenly overcome with fatigue. After a long pause he said, somewhat irrelevantly, "Yes," caught the boy up in his arms, kissed him on the brow, shut the door, and carried him into the house.

FROM that day Oliver ruled like a tyrant over the guilty consciences around him. He never uttered a threat or a word of blackmail, but oppressed and tortured his victims by his look, his seriousness, his laughter — his very presence told them that he knew of their relationships. Thenceforward he held aloof from his stepmother, and she, for her part, without so much as uttering a word, but as if driven by some superior force or power, abandoned her attitude of authority over him and treated him like an adult. Henryk, by all manner of kind attentions, tried again and again to make up to the boy for the blow in the face he had given him. But Oliver did not allow himself to be bribed, and remained unmoved. He kept cool, unapproachable and impenetrable, even towards his father, who just about this time, owing to some secret trouble, showed signs of wishing to draw closer to him. But Oliver would not allow himself to be deprived of his secret power. He knew perfectly well that Eliza's and Henryk's passion drew them to each other again and again, and that Claes was yielding ever more and more to his old man's lust for young girls; and all three knew that the boy was aware of every one of their misdeeds. And at times he even took pleasure with his silent smile in creating opportunities for

them, and removing obstacles from the path of their lusts, only to torture them the more by his presence afterwards.

At last there came a night when Henryk could bear it no longer, and, filling a fairly large sack with very fine sand and powdered glass, he crept barefoot into Oliver's room. But the boy was not asleep. Through the darkness he called out, "Who is there?" His brother did not move, and Oliver, as if he could see in the dark, exclaimed:

"Oh, Henryk!"

Cold beads of sweat stood out on Henryk's brow. He waited a minute, or perhaps more, and as Oliver seemed to be lying still, he sprang towards the bed, swinging the sack in the air, and emptied out the sand and glass.

"Oh, Henryk!" said a voice behind him. It was Oliver, who had crept towards the open door. "Don't you know that I am your mother's son?"

So saying, he closed the door, bolted it from the outside and, putting his mouth to a crevice, said:

"That sand was meant to tear my lungs to shreds. Brother Henryk, I have heard of such things before. Someone in Bruges killed a lot of people like that. But, Henryk, why should you want to kill me?"

His brother did not stir, but tore lumps of skin off his knuckles with his teeth. After a while he heard Oliver's soft soprano again.

"Listen, Henryk! I have said nothing to father about you and Eliza, but to-morrow I will tell him — to-morrow or the day after to-morrow. But it would be better to tell him to-morrow morning early in case you tried again to kill me to-morrow evening. Now good-night."

He went away and slept in a hayloft. The next morning he opened the door of his room gently and found his brother fast asleep on his bed. He woke him. Henryk started up with a look of alarm and Oliver, with his malicious smile, said to him:

"So you did not throw yourself out of the window, Henryk, but only the sand?"

His brother clasped his hands imploringly.

"Say nothing. . . ."

Oliver pulled a face. Henryk raised his fist — but in a moment he was running out of the room. He remained at work until

midday, keeping a close watch on his father and on Oliver, who seemed to be intentionally hanging about. But after the midday meal and during the afternoon, when it became more difficult to keep an eye on both of them, uncertainty forced him to give in. Making some excuse, he ordered the head man, who had to take some flour to Ghent, to remain behind, and drove into the town himself. He did not return, but went on from Ghent to Bruges. Here he secured the services of a native of Thielt to bring back the wagon, and this man informed Claes that Henryk had gone on business to Liége. As the Neckers often acted on impulse in this way, no one was particularly surprised by the news. Oliver alone laughed in his stand-offish way, and Eliza heard him; but she was of the type that asks no questions and consumes its own smoke. Even Oliver did not know whether she missed Henryk or even thought about him. And he grew more friendly to her.

Six weeks later Henryk suddenly turned up in Ghent again, discovered without much difficulty that nothing out of the way had occurred at home, and appeared on the same day in Thielt, his pockets full of money, and with some bales of fine cloth, and a number of fairly large orders for some of the native products of his village. He was given a cold welcome, for at the Neckers' sentiment did not count for much. Claes nodded, Eliza gave a little smile and said, "Good evening, Henryk"; while Oliver pretended not to notice the hand his brother held out to him.

AND YET at this time there was one creature in the world to whom he was wholeheartedly and disinterestedly kind. This was Louise, the more beautiful and more dangerous of his sisters. The fate of her elder sister, which had been to remain at home until she was twenty-five and then to marry — a rare occurrence for the daughters of a Necker family — was not to be repeated in the case of Louise. For when she was eighteen she suddenly discarded the ways of her childhood, during which she had scarcely been seen or heard, and after a short spell of bewilderment at her awakened womanhood, learnt how to exploit her youthful beauty to rouse the passions of men and secure herself much pleasure. At this moment she found, as a matter of course, in Oliver, whom hitherto she had avoided as much as the others had, though without sharing their aversion for him,

a confederate, an assistant, a messenger, a scandal-monger and a protector of the utmost value. It had not been necessary for these two to discover or confide in each other, or to pledge each other to faith or secrecy. For one evening, when she was creeping out of the barn, Oliver appeared before her and advised her in a friendly way not to go home, as Eliza was still up, but to give Jehan, the head man, time to go first, and to wait in the barn until he, Oliver, threw a stone at the door — that was all. From that moment they were one, and proceeded to undermine, first the farmstead and then the village, so as to watch everybody blown sky high. They caught everyone they could — from callow youths to dissipated fathers of families — and mocked them, cheated them, set them at loggerheads, and laughed when they came to blows and their women folk howled. Those who ventured to complain to Claes were jeered at for their pains, or else turned out of the house; for old Claes knew that Oliver was crouching in a corner, or behind the door. Once Eliza wanted to take Louise to task, but the girl was not alone. Behind her stood Oliver, with his eyes fixed on his stepmother — and Eliza held her tongue. Louise may have marvelled at the power he wielded, or she may have thought it merely due to his peculiar personality; she asked no questions. But at last the scope for the wild game she was playing seemed too narrow, and she escaped with Oliver to Bruges for the great market held there once a week. Oliver returned alone. Claes questioned him about Louise.

“She is all right,” said Oliver, drawing himself up.

“Is she coming back?” Eliza enquired gently.

“No.”

She was not mentioned again.

FATE, which Oliver had seen so busy all about him, and which at an early age he had so strangely helped to direct, without himself being caught in its toils, suddenly laid a hand upon him when he was fifteen years old. Thielt was all astir. Roosje Dascher, the baker’s eight-year-old daughter, had gone out picking blackberries, and had not returned, and in spite of the most careful search, no trace of her could be found. At about the same time Oliver fell ill for the first time in his life. The whole night long he did nothing but vomit, and it was impos-

sible to discover the cause, for, although he had had exactly the same food as the rest of the household, nobody else was even slightly indisposed. He also cried a good deal — an alarming symptom with him; for no one had ever seen him cry. But he would say nothing, and Eliza was the only person he would allow to come near him for the whole of the two days he lay in bed. When at the end of the second day she was about to leave him, he held her back and in a calm voice said:

“I forgive you, mother. Forgive me, too!”

The woman looked at him in alarm, but he would answer none of her questions, and seemed to be very tired. So she kissed him gently on the brow and left.

That same night Oliver got up, dressed and made a bundle of his belongings. Then, with a lantern in his hand, he crept barefoot to Claes’ room, for his father had been in the habit of sleeping alone for many years. The door was locked. Oliver knocked. His father answered immediately, and his voice sounded brisk though a trifle husky.

“Who’s there?”

“Oliver.”

“What do you want, Oliver?”

“Open the door, father.”

“Why must I open the door, Oliver?”

“Why don’t you want to open the door, father?”

Claes was silent for a moment, and breathed heavily. Then at last he spoke.

“I don’t wish to see you, Oliver.”

“Why don’t you wish to see me, father? — because you must hear what I have to say.”

Oliver heard a short, wild gurgle, and after a while he said:

“Will it be better for you, father, if you do not see me?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Claes replied thickly, as if a hand was laid over his mouth; “but I don’t wish to see you, Oliver.”

The boy pressed his brow against the rough wood of the door and groaned.

“I have got to go away from here now, father.”

“Why, Oliver?”

“I know where Roosje is lying and what she looks like, father.”

The silence that followed was so oppressive that Oliver could hear his temples beating against the wood. Then Claes whispered, and his whispered words rang through the door like the notes of a bell:

"You must go now, Oliver."

And Oliver answered softly:

"Is that all, father?"

"Take some money out of the chest, Oliver."

"Is that all, father?"

"I have loved you, and I love you still. Oliver, my son."

Oliver fell on his knees and dug his nails into the wood.

"Father, father! And will you still love me to-morrow?"

Claes' voice sounded clearer, as though his fears had vanished.

"Dead men cannot love, Oliver."

The boy rattled the latch and gave a cry of pain:

"I must see you just once, father; I want to tell you something. Father — something that I know and that you don't. . . ."

Claes interrupted him in a voice both calm and clear:

"You must not see me again and you must not say any more to me, Oliver, and you must despise men as I despise them, and you must not love yourself the more on that account, for you are no devil, but simply a poor mortal — just as I do not love myself, because I am a poor mortal. You may injure mankind if by so doing you also injure yourself, Oliver — and you will learn that pain is closely akin to pleasure, or you may already have learnt that. Now go, Oliver."

At dawn of day, when Oliver was half-way between Thielt and Ghent, the whole house was roused by Eliza's cries on discovering the hanging body of her husband.

OLIVER made haste to leave Ghent before the news of the events at Thielt should reach the town. And about midday a dealer in arms from Liège, who was driving his cart to Bruges, agreed to take the boy with him in return for a suitable sum.

There was no need for Oliver to make exhaustive enquiries about Louise in Bruges. The landlord of the inn at which he had alighted a year before, and where he had handed her over body and soul to an old and fat but obviously wealthy gauze-

weaver, examined the lean and lanky youth with some amusement, and cracked a joke about the inadequacy of the young man's powers, in both senses of the word, for the feat of conquering the lady's affections. Was the youth really in earnest? For she was the most passionate and most expensive harlot in the town. Oliver laughed with him at his joke, and without volunteering overmuch information, or attempting to remind the man that he was Louise's brother, begged to be told her address.

Louise lived in a fine mansion close to Jacob's Gate. As her house was frequented only by the highest in the land, the authorities left her in peace, more particularly as, actuated more by prudence than charity, she often sent gifts to the convents of the Beguines, the Church and the institutions for the poor. After he had presented her with her house, the gauze-weaver, who had begun to grow mean and tiresome, was given his *cong  *; for by now her beauty had attracted sufficient attention to enable her to take her pick of the richest merchants belonging to the Florentine colony in the town, and of the rich young bloods of the patrician families of Bruges. La Rossa, as she was called, and as she soon also styled herself, thus led a life in which she was at once coveted and covetous, abandoned and domineering, and she was well pleased with herself.

Oliver had some difficulty in getting past the Frisian giant who kept guard at Louise's door, who insisted on regarding him with the utmost suspicion and stubbornly repeated that the lady was not at home that day. In view of his plans for the future, the youth had thought it advisable not to reveal himself as Louise's brother, and had represented himself as a scholar who wished to enter La Rossa's service as secretary. And whether it was that his black clothes looked like those of a scholar, or that his manner of lying sounded like truth, the porter allowed him in.

Louise welcomed him with joy. He remained with her and served her as he had done in Thielt, though they kept their relationship a secret. In a few weeks, after having with consummate assurance taken complete stock of her position, he took over the direction of her affairs. He was quick to realise the extraordinary power of her beauty, and raised her ambitions accordingly. He noticed, for instance, that during High Mass at the Church of St. Salvador, a certain high prelate could not take

his eyes off her. She became his mistress, and was shrewd enough to follow Oliver's advice, and spare the feelings of her great ecclesiastical benefactor by limiting her exploitation of the rich young men of the town. The prelate was also well pleased with the obliging, discreet and intelligent youth, who could be so useful in any capacity, and for a while cherished the idea of inducing him to adopt the Church as a calling. Oliver did not say no; he went to the brethren of St. John's to learn reading, writing, and a little Latin, and skilfully postponed *sine die* the fixing of a date by his patron for his initiation as a novice. Very soon, however, his sharp eyes saw that the old ecclesiastic had ceased to show his former animation in the presence of his sister, and came to the conclusion that it would be better to change both the possessor of her charms and the town in which they were displayed. And thus it came about that a certain papal legate, a young and handsome man, the scion of an old Italian family, who, when dining with the prelate, had allowed his eyes to wander somewhat tactlessly, saw La Rossa's strange secretary enter his apartment on the next day, armed with the following proposal: La Rossa was prepared to follow him if he would come to terms in a straightforward manner with the prelate, arrange for the purchase of the house through him, be ready to take her secretary, the porter and the two chambermaids along with him, and undertake to expect her favours only eight days after her arrival in Rome, after having made full and sufficient provision for her personal expenses. The Legate, who could not rest for thought of La Rossa's dazzling white skin, her small, hard mouth and her almond-shaped eyes, which at times shone like amber, agreed, and found that he had to meet with much less resistance than he had expected from the prelate. The journey took them through France and Anjou to Nice, whence they were conveyed in one of the papal galleys to Rome.

There the girl's exotic beauty met with a triumphant reception. It was impossible for the Legate to shield La Fiamminga — as she was called by the fashionable folk of Rome — very long from the storm of admiration and desire that she provoked, and he was soon obliged to surrender her to the almighty Cardinal Borgia, in exchange for a rich abbey. This he was the less reluctant to do as he was not only ambitious, but was also aware that he himself would don the Cardinal's Hat as soon as Borgia

had obtained the much coveted Triple Crown. Oliver remained the most important person in her little court and the inevitable channel for obtaining access to her, recognised even by the Cardinal. As Oliver remained true to the first principle of his policy, which was to stand honourably and single-mindedly by any man whose patronage was of most value for the time being, he saw to it that while her other admirers were relieved of their presents, they were always dismissed outside the door of La Fiamminga's bedroom, so that the Cardinal came to regard him as one of his minions. He heaped favours upon him, in the first place in order to please him, and secondly in order through him to please La Rossa. Thus it was that he discovered the extraordinary character of the young man — his zeal in pursuing a hidden object, and his uncanny, almost un-Christian energy, which burned in his eyes and made his glance almost insufferable, though it had nothing in it of the evil eye of the Jettatura — that evil eye which a bone amulet, a piece of forked coral, or the outstretched fingers of the priest could ward off and paralyse. No, his eyes were not protuberant and close together, but deep set and fringed with long lashes like those of a woman, with dark unfathomable depths, alluring and dangerous as the unruffled surface of Albanian lakes. The Cardinal noticed his calm, intelligent and self-reliant bearing, his amazing memory which enabled him to master the Italian language in four months, and his strange ability, after only a few minutes' conversation, to pierce the hide of the most cautious. He also observed how, armed with the knowledge of their aims and weaknesses, Oliver moved with circumspection, and quietly confounded them while imperceptibly driving them to their doom. Borgia recognised the usefulness of such a man, whom he had ceased to regard as a boy (Oliver had not told him his age), and with the fewest possible words he directed Oliver's complete lack of conscience into the new and attractive channels of subterranean political intrigue. Oliver worked secretly for him as a sort of secretary, providing him, as leader of the Spanish Party, with information about the movements of the opposition parties — the anti-clerical Roman aristocracy and the active humanists who, allied to the broad-minded Pope by their common love of science, were strongly opposed to the candidature of a Borgia. It was no very difficult task for Oliver to use the

apparent neutrality of the little palazzo hard by the Forum of Trajan, where Louise lived, for the furtherance of his political ends and, by means of La Fiamminga's charms, to lure influential nobles and scholars into the necessary attitude of confidence. Nevertheless, when, at the bidding of the Cardinal, he attempted to put a match to the explosive material thus collected, he himself came to grief. A certain scholar connected with the fanatical apologists of the Republican and anti-Papal school of Lorenzo Valla and other humanistic leaders, had been incited by Oliver and his fellow *agents provocateurs* to conspire against the life of the Pope. Borgia's object was to expose the conspiracy on the eve of the attempted assassination and thus have in his hands the means of annihilating the whole party. But the scholar lost courage before the event and presenting himself before the Papal authorities revealed the plot and gave the names of his fellow-conspirators. Borgia, who had some difficulty in extricating himself from the scandal, did not hesitate to leave his subordinates in the lurch. But the Papal spies, who forced their way into La Rossa's house in order to seize her secretary and hang him with the rest from the small tower of St. Angelo, could not find him. Oliver had fled to Bracciano whose overlord always extended a hearty welcome to any man who was being hounded by the Pope. There he copied Poggio's Latin translations of Xenophon's *Cyropædia*, shaved the ducal chin, and promised his master La Fiamminga.

But Oliver was not destined to see his sister again. When the plague wrought havoc among the multitudes that had assembled in Rome during Holy Year he ventured to return to the dread city which had been forsaken by the Pope, the Curia and all the magistrates. But he found the Cardinal's Palace and La Rossa's house quite empty. One tale was that the courtesan was dead, another that before the outbreak of the epidemic she had escaped with one of King Alphonso's courtiers to Naples, and yet another that she had been seen in Borgia's suite when he had fled south before the plague. Sad at heart, Oliver took a little picture of Louise painted by a pupil of the elder Pollajuolo, and made his way to Florence in the company of a copyist of Giorgio Trapezunzio.

There he started work again, first as a scribe and barber, and then, at the suggestion of a loose woman who protected him,

as a manufacturer of cosmetics and beauty waters; and in a short time became quite comfortably off. But as his mixtures contained too much mercury, they did all manner of harm to those who used them, and he only just succeeded in escaping the arm of the law.

There followed five years of wandering under a hundred different masks and names — as scribe, scholar, barber, miracle-worker, professor of black art, spy, *souteneur* and sharper. While he touched the lowest depths and was sorely buffeted by the billows of fate, events left but little mark upon him. He was never carried away by them, and never left behind him more than a garment or a name — at most a bit of skin. He was more loved than hated, though he himself neither hated nor loved, and in using his gifts never lusted for wealth. But every year his longing to return north grew stronger and stronger, and when he was twenty-five he made his appearance once more in Ghent.

On the very day after his arrival he pushed on to Thielt and arrived just at midday. Without a sign of emotion he gazed upon the brick church of the village, the familiar houses and streets, and his father's farm. "Why did I come?" he asked himself, puzzled by a strange feeling of expectation which he could not shake off.

Eliza had grown into a portly matron, with here and there a white strand in her hair. She turned to face the door and exclaimed in deep hollow tones:

"Oh, Oliver!"

Whereupon she rose with friendly eagerness and came forward to meet him. Henryk, too, whose head had begun to grow bald, welcomed him, and, with some embarrassment, quickly pointed to a pretty young woman who was sitting beside him:

"This is Lysbeth, Master Willem Rym's daughter. We have been married two years."

Oliver only vouchsafed the three of them a curt word and a glance; for at the table, close to Lysbeth, there sat a girl of about eleven or twelve years of age, who had been smiling at him from the very moment he had entered the door. Now people seldom smiled at him. Never yet had he known any fellow creature to radiate brightness about him by a smile, nor had he ever felt this brightness in eye or heart. He smiled back (rarely

indeed did Oliver smile without malice) and became suddenly intoxicated with a pure and utterly unknown joy — a sort of ecstasy. Immediately the mad thought flashed across his mind — “I expected this joy!” He caught up the happy glance from the grey eyes of the young girl and the flash of her beautiful teeth, and cast a triumphant look at the others. Whereupon they all three laughed and the gloomy room seemed suddenly illumined. Eliza was the first to speak:

“I am glad to see you are well, Oliver,” she said.

Then Lysbeth added:

“This is Anne, my little sister.”

Oliver looked at her again.

“I shall stay in Ghent now,” he said, and smiled kindly once more.

OLIVER joined the Barbers' Guild. He found no difficulty in making his way, first because he was a Necker and a much travelled man, and secondly because he was senior assistant to Willem Rym, Master of the Guild, and the revered leader of the movement for Ghentish independence. It was not long before he became Master, and together with Willem Rym reorganised the opposition party, weakened as it had been by the unhappy war with Burgundy and the loss of the ancient municipal rights. Thus the old Master, who saw in him only the patriot and the skilful fellow-guildsman, loved him like a son, and as soon as she was fifteen gave him Anne in marriage. Not long afterwards Rym died and as a matter of course Oliver inherited both his business and his political position. Independent at last and possessed of a loving wife, he allowed himself to become what he was. Gradually and without giving them a handle, he terrorised the pro-Burgundian party, not out of patriotism but from sheer joy in a political game once started, and because he took pleasure in exercising his intellectual powers and taking careful stock of the strength of his French opponents. Thus he worked with the dark weapons of his genius and experience. He decimated the leaders of the opposition without exposing himself, and deprived them of the support of the people, whose fanaticism was easily roused. To one and all he was friendly and obliging. Apparently devoid of any great personal ambition, and indifferent to the honours of office, he was seen neither too much nor too

little in public. Nevertheless he already had a fast but unseen hold upon the reins, and guided the masses as he pleased, though they never suspected he was the man at the helm or the hidden captor of souls. Yet they recognised the gulf separating him from themselves — his extraordinary gifts, his isolation and superiority. They were always pleased to see him and readily followed his lead. But they did not want to come too close. — He became the agent of France not from any personal interest in treachery but out of the strategist's love of exploiting two movements and forces which happened to run parallel. In the eyes of the people he remained a patriot of Ghent; and the genius of the populace called the Master, as the servants of Thielt had called the boy — Oliver, the Devil. But Oliver himself knew the difference: it was no longer the curse of terrified stable-lads but the homage of the people of Ghent, who had a spice of the Devil in their own composition and felt drawn towards him.

Chapter 3

THE TOUCHSTONE

MASTER OLIVER'S attitude after the departure of the Duke was understood only by the elect. He exerted all his influence to restrain the temper of the town and prevent it from making pointless demonstrations against Brussels. During the early days, when excitement was still at its height, he was able by means of the Guilds, who were devoted to him, to persuade the town magistrates to protect the offices of the ducal government with an armed guard, and to liberate those leaders of the pro-Burgundian party who had been taken into custody, without any prejudice to their honour or to their position in the municipality. And with the support of these people and of the moderates among the Masters of the Guilds, he succeeded in securing a small majority against the Radicals who wished to ally themselves with Liège, then on the point of open rebellion.

On the day after this secret conference, Oliver met Pieter Heuriblocq in front of the warehouses of the Quai aux Blès. The wine merchant, who belonged to none of the governing bodies, and still had the impression of recent events fresh in his mind, had been careful to avoid the Master after their last passage of words. And now when he suddenly saw Oliver beside him, he tried to hide his fear under cover of cold civility. But Oliver, with a gesture of impatience, said gravely:

"No one has any wish to hurt you, Heuriblocq — on the contrary, we need you badly."

Pieter glanced at him suspiciously. The Master drew him into a doorway and quietly gave him a brief account of the nature and result of the conference, urging him to go to Brussels and inform his business friends about it. He set cunningly to work, introducing the subject casually between two long discussions about business, and Heuriblocq's brow puckered:

"Do you think me such a fool, Oliver, as to be taken in by the clumsiest of your devil's tricks?"

The Master shook his head impatiently, and asked him

whether he did not know the law of Ghent which punished for high treason any member of the council who betrayed official secrets.

"What are you driving at, Oliver?"

"God in Heaven, Heuriblocq, all I mean is that from this moment, you, who hold no official position, have me, a member of the council, in the hollow of your hand — do you still believe in devil's tricks? Can't you see how worried I am?"

The wine merchant was silent, and Oliver explained how his one fear was lest, at an opportune moment, the Duke should treat Ghent as he had already treated Liège. He must be reassured.

"As you are in a position to bear him good tidings, Pieter," he concluded, "you can reckon up in good round figures what you will gain by the trip."

He turned away. In the afternoon Heuriblocq came to him and said he would undertake the journey.

Events proved Oliver right. The people of Liège broke into open rebellion, killed the officials of the ducal government and advanced as far as St. Trond. Anxious days followed for Oliver and the more moderate among the town magistrates, when the Radicals, utterly ignoring them, called the excited populace of Ghent to arms. But a bold and clever move on the part of the chief magistrate, who on the advice (or the false assurances) of Oliver celebrated the victory of the Duke twenty-four hours before it had occurred, turned the tide. Two of the agitators were hurriedly tried and executed, and the Government in Brussels was informed of the executions at the very moment when, as a matter of fact, the Duke was inflicting a defeat on the forces of Liège at St. Trond and Tongres. While the Duke was advancing on Liège and, after a few days' slight resistance, captured the town and inflicted condign punishment upon it, Oliver sent Pieter Heuriblocq a second time to Brussels. On his return the Master astonished the chief magistrate by the following extraordinary proposal: — If they wished Ghent to retain her most important privileges, he said, and peace to be maintained, mere neutrality was no longer sufficient; some sort of loyal demonstration was absolutely necessary, in the form of a voluntary renunciation of all purely formal privileges. Above the excited clamour that interrupted him, he shouted:

"I know what I am talking about, gentlemen! Maybe I also know why I am saying what I do say. Is it not largely by my efforts that the Ghentish party has been strengthened and our Ghentish rights recovered? Is there one among you who can say that the proposals I have made of late have served any other interests than those of Ghent?"

They were silent.

"So, for the good of our beloved town, let me advise the council to send without delay ten of their most respected burghers humbly and on foot to Brussels with the banners of the Guilds, to lay them at the feet of the Duke. He may return them or he may keep them — what of it? Surely there is silk enough in Ghent? The young lord loves ceremonies, and this gesture of humility will make him forget the indignities he is planning — yea, gentlemen, the indignities he is most surely planning."

The last words, spoken loudly and with emphasis disarmed all criticism. After an awkward pause, the first magistrate asked:

"Would you be willing, Master Necker, to lead the delegation?"

Oliver reflected a moment; his eyes were closed, his thin lips compressed, and his hands rested heavily on the edge of the table. Then he answered slowly:

"I thank your Worship for the honour your question does me. I am quite ready to be one of the delegates. As the youngest Guild Master, however, I do not possess the necessary qualifications to lead it. Were I chosen for this office it would but serve to ruin the undertaking, above all in the sharp eyes of the Duke."

Accordingly the third town magistrate was elected leader of the deputation, which, in addition to Oliver, was to consist of four town councillors and three Guild Masters, all of whom were more or less pledged to the cause of Burgundy. At Oliver's suggestion, Heuriblocq, the wine merchant, whom he had to thank for his information from Brussels, was also added to the number.

"Anne," said Oliver, with a smile, when he reached home, "the great game has begun." And he kissed her. "But thanks to me Ghent will only have to lose one good barber and nine of her brave burghers. Surely this is not too high a price to pay for her salvation! And now the great game begins, Anne."

Two days later the delegation started off, the town having by solemn proclamation undertaken to protect both the personal and the business interests of its members. Each delegate had a servant with him. Oliver took Daniel Bart. When at Wetteren they halted for the first time, the Master stole away from the rest for one moment and swallowed a certain Florentine powder. When the party set off again on the march, his face turned suddenly yellow and he became feverish. Supported by Daniel, he dragged himself along as far as Aalst, but there he broke down, his eyes turned glassy and he became delirious. He was left behind at an inn under the care of Bart. Heuriblocq tried to have a word with the sick man but Daniel Bart would not move from the bedside, and at last, with a nasty look in his eyes, he said:

“Master Pieter, but a day or two ago in Ghent my Master said you knew as much about this matter as he did. So what do you want of him?”

Without a word Heuriblocq took his departure. As, in one of his lucid moments, Oliver had asked for a priest and for Anne, the distracted magistrate, shortly before the delegation had moved on, had sent a messenger on horseback to Ghent to fetch Oliver's wife. The rider was somewhat surprised to find the lady already prepared for a journey, but the anguish of her words when she heard of her husband's illness, and a few silver dollars, prevented him from giving any further thought to the matter.

Deeply lamenting the loss of Oliver, because it made their mission more difficult, the delegates arrived disconsolately outside Brussels. They were surprised to find that no preparations whatsoever had been made for their reception, and began to fear the worst, particularly when, in spite of all the ante-chamber intrigues of Heuriblocq, they waited several days before they were even allowed to enter the town. The majority wanted to return to Ghent and communicated their intention to the authorities. The only reply was that their quarters were placed under a military guard. At last, couched in barely civil terms, they received the command to appear before the Duke, and they found him in a most ungracious mood. Not only did he have their banners torn to shreds before their eyes, but he also detained them as hostages, so that in future, as he remarked with

a sneer, they might be protected from any miraculous intervention on the part of St. Lieven. Apart from this, his mercy was great; for he disclaimed all intention of making any further example of Ghent for the time being, though the unruly town well deserved it, and gave permission for one of their servants to be sent back to Ghent to inform the chief magistrate that the lives of the delegates would be in danger if there were the smallest sign of insurrection in the town. When the pilgrims returned under escort to their quarter they noticed that Heuriblocq was missing. On the same day he was sent to Liège as tax-gatherer for the Duke.

THE effect of the weak draught — one of those secret potions which make the apothecaries of Florence more useful to their overlords than were the condottieri — was neutralised in a few hours by means of an antidote, and when Anne arrived she found the Master already in a soothing sleep. On the following morning he was himself again, and informed the landlord of the inn that he was now ready to go on to Brussels. The three did indeed leave Aalst in a southerly direction, but on reaching the first village on the road they turned westward and made for Oudenarde. Here their baggage and a closed travelling chaise were awaiting them, and they forthwith attached themselves to a merchant caravan on its way to Valenciennes. They were already in Paris when the news reached Ghent that the sick Master together with his wife and senior assistant had mysteriously vanished between Aalst and Brussels, and it was generally supposed that they had fallen victims either to highwaymen or to the hostile inhabitants of the district. At all events, their loss was bitterly lamented by the town already in mourning for the sad fate of the other delegates.

While still on the road Oliver had heard that the Court was in Touraine and he had informed Jean de Beaune of his arrival. So he waited for an answer in Paris. After a few days, there arrived at the inn near the Porte du Temple, the address Oliver had given, a courier bearing an order which, though unsigned, was sealed with the royal seal. It commanded him to take the opportunity while in Paris of collecting evidence against Antoine Fradin, the Franciscan monk whose sermons at the convent church of the Porte Saint Germain were exciting much

attention and were exceedingly displeasing to the King; after which he was to come on to Amboise.

"Anne," laughed Oliver, "our Master would fain test me with a touchstone — or is this already the great game?"

They listened to one of the monk's sermons, preached to a vast congregation. The preacher was a good-looking young man and displayed a fine array of teeth. His mighty voice filled and coloured the grey Gothic basilica, as he fulminated against the sins of the flesh, against voluptuousness and the vice of pride. He told them naked truths full of force and fire. Oliver smiled. Suddenly the preacher changed his subject. With a subtle modulation of his voice which relaxed the sensuous tension about his listeners, without destroying the docility and excitement with which they followed him he lamented the vices of the upper classes; and, gliding imperceptibly into politics, deplored the imperfect administration of justice by the municipalities, the nobles and the princes. Finally, in accents of fanaticism which seemed to excuse his boldness and made it appear almost inevitable, he named the person of the King — the great King! For a second or two he paused and the vast pile scarce dared to breathe. The women hung intoxicated on his lips. Then adopting a different tone, as if his voice were doing obeisance to His Majesty, he said the King was good, the King wanted what was right; it was the people about him who were evil, they were blood-suckers, hangmen, possibly traitors! Oliver blinked his eyes. The monk pitched his voice still higher and raising his eyes aloft spoke almost in a whisper. He saw danger to the King, danger to the country; the traitors wanted war; the people knew what war meant; the city had only to remember the desolation of the last siege but three years ago. War must be avoided! Oliver gazing gravely at him whispered to his wife:

"The fellow is not unskilful! There is more behind him than meets the eye; but he is dull and heavy as a bull. He will fall into the simplest trap."

Anne went to him for confession; she did not bow her head, however, but looked at him boldly and provocatively. He gave her hasty absolution and allowing his fingers to wander excitedly over her neck, pushing her kerchief aside, he begged her for an appointment. Anne suggested a place in the *Boise de Neuilly* close to the banks of the Seine. She would meet him there the

following day after dark. As Brother Anthony was hastening up the wooded incline from the bank at the appointed hour and just as he caught sight of a shadow moving out of the thickness of the trees, he suddenly received a heavy blow on the back of the head. Daniel Bart lifted him up unconscious and with Oliver's help bound him to a tree, whereupon the Master put a sharp smelling essence to his nose. The monk opened his eyes and struggled to get free from the ropes, tried to cry out. But the acid fumes which he breathed in through his mouth almost stifled him. Oliver turned his bull's eye lantern right into his face as he was coughing, put the phial back into his pocket, and brought out the order with the royal seal into the light. He spoke almost civilly:

"*De par le roy*, Brother Anthony; it would ill beseem you to cry 'help' or 'murder!' As luck would have it you have fallen into a trap. By calling you are a moralist, by nature a he-goat — thus does the Almighty make fools of us! As a child of sin myself I readily sympathise with you; as a servant of the King your conduct constrains me to bid my men not only raise the rope about your neck but also literally to raise you to the tree, and as a sign, seal and signal carve the lily on its bark."

Oliver allowed the cone of light from the lantern to swing sideways for a second in the direction of Daniel Bart, who, dressed like a hangman in a sleeveless tunic, assumed gigantic proportions in the long shadows thrown by his huge frame. The monk exclaimed hoarsely:

"I am not subject to the jurisdiction of the King, but only to that of my Prior."

Oliver chuckled softly.

"Are you not aware, Brother, that the King often rides rough shod over such prejudices and takes a delight in it? Do you imagine he would pick you out for special consideration, simply because you are a he-goat? After all the he-goat is only a scape-goat for something else — I mean political agents cannot go out goat-shooting, Brother Anthony. I am afraid I cannot possibly absolve you of this sin."

The monk bit his lips and blinked in the light. Then he asked gently:

"May I see the face of him to whom I speak? It is hard

to reply to the darkness, and the words I hear are not the words of a Provost."

He closed his eyes and hung his head.

"Maybe the Devil is tempting me again as he did through that woman," he groaned.

Oliver opened his eyes wide and let the light fall for a moment on his hollow cheeks and immobile features.

"*Apage Satana!*" cried the monk, and quaking in the ropes, he began feverishly to mutter a prayer.

"Brother," laughed Oliver, "by this simple trick I could get anything I liked out of you. But I will do it better and more easily than the chance combination of a moonless night and your confusion happens to suggest. Whether I am the Devil or the King's Provost is neither here nor there."

Suddenly, without pausing, he said in Flemish: "You, my friend, come from Brabant, and are working for the Duke."

The monk stopped praying and seemed about to answer, but all he did was to cough convulsively and continue to pray. Oliver added impatiently in the same dialect:

"This is no Devil's trick, Brother. I knew it from your own sermon, by certain words it is very difficult for a Flemish tongue to pronounce, in spite of your excellent French."

The monk went on gabbling Latin, whereupon Oliver called out in Flemish over his shoulder:

"Daniel! I've had enough of this! Call your men and make an end of him."

The breaking of twigs was heard. The monk, with the perspiration running down his face, cast a look of terror into the blackness:

"Yes, I am from Brussels!" he cried.

"Wait!" shouted Oliver into the shadows.

Then he turned towards the monk.

"Now just listen to me, Brother Toon. I know enough already from your behaviour. You are one of the agents sent by Burgundy to Paris to raise an agitation against war. It would not be convenient for the Duke to make war just now, perhaps he has enough to see to in his own land, or possibly he is still seeking allies — ay, allies from the King's own cities; and you are here to make the King unpopular. But all this, as you see, has proved dangerous to yourself alone. Now listen! In your

sermon you mentioned the bloodsucker, that is Monsieur de Beaune; the hangman, that is Tristan l'Hermite, and you also spoke of the traitor. Was that only rhetoric, or are you trying to play the part of *deus ex machina* in aid of your own prophecies? You must surely know that no one ever speaks of the first two without the third — Cardinal Balue? If by the traitor you meant him, Brother, and can give me the smallest proof, I will cut you loose from the tree and set you free."

He held the lantern so that his own face as well as that of the monk was lit up. Both men stared each other silently in the eyes and Oliver said slowly:

"I am from Ghent, Brother, and serve only myself even though I serve a foreign master. And I never harm anyone who can be of use to me. Now understand — you will be of service to me if you answer my question, and by way of reward I will spare your head. Otherwise you may as well say good-bye to it."

Reflecting a moment the Franciscan whispered:

"The Cardinal is carrying on a secret correspondence from Paris with the Count of Crèvecœur, the Burgundian Chancellor, in whose service I am. One of our body is the go-between. The proof of their machinations is not difficult to give: in a little while the Cardinal will advise the King to agree to a meeting with the Duke. This will be the danger to the King of which I spoke."

"Does the Cardinal know of your existence and of the significance of your sermons?"

"Certainly not," replied the monk. "I am working quite independently of his scheme, which apparently still hangs in the balance. I am also bearing in mind the possibility that the Duke's obvious mistrust of him may prove justified."

"The name of the messenger, Brother?"

"Jacques Viole."

"Thank you, Brother Toon, we may yet be of use to each other."

Oliver thereupon cut the ropes which bound the monk to the tree. As Fradin shook his aching limbs, the Master added in friendly tones that he was now at liberty to go, but that he must keep quiet and not go into the pulpit again. He had nothing to fear provided he preached no more public sermons, but he would be watched.

With a few hasty words of thanks, and looking to neither right nor left, the monk hurried away.

"A good beginning," observed Oliver to Daniel Bart, "and not even difficult."

ON the following morning the trio left Paris and, traversing the fertile district of Beauce, stayed the night at Orleans and then followed the course of the Loire. At sunset they were in sight of the castle of Amboise, high up on a rock, a thing of evil omen amid the peaceful beauties of the verdant plain, and frowning suspicion and defiance all around. Anne, touching Oliver's arm, said:

"My friend, this is a serious matter. Yonder is a hater who loves naught save his own will."

Oliver, smiling kindly at her, replied:

"I love my own will too, but I also love thee, Anne, so perchance I am better than he."

THE heavy round towers of the castle, its great walls, and the rock on which it stood, obscured the last glow of the sunset. Its sinister silhouette lowered overhead like a fist suspended from heaven above the earth.

"I am frightened," said Anne.

Oliver stroked her brow gently, but his soul too was oppressed by the threatening aspect of the castle walls. It was of diabolical significance, he mused, that its foundations should consist of the underground dungeons and oubliettes, where Louis of Valois' enemies were consigned to their last terrible oblivion — chambers of horror for hundreds of poor wretches, dying in long-drawn-out agony; pits of deepest despair, of stifled groans and vain curses. If this man can sleep on such a bed, thought he, and I do not succeed in destroying his slumbers, then he is stronger than I and things will go badly with me should I wish to shake him off; nay, if I would not be sucked dry I needs must shake him off. He frowned. But if I succeed in spying out his conscience and getting a hold on it, he will not be able to shake off either me or his conscience. . . . But of all this he said nothing to Anne.

At each of the three barriers before the fortified gate of the town a guard was posted who asked the travellers their business. But when Oliver showed them his royal mandate, the

turnpikes and gate were opened. As the Master thought it was too late to take his wife and belongings to the castle that night, the three put up at an inn close by. But an hour later, about ten o'clock, one of the Scottish Bodyguard presented himself before them with an order for Necker to appear before the King. Unwilling and tired though he was, Oliver followed the soldier. They made their way through streets buried in the stillness of night and mounted a steep and difficult path up to the castle. Oliver kept close behind his guide, as he had heard tell of traps and iron spikes protecting all means of access to the castle. From time to time the guardsman called out the password into the darkness. No answer was vouchsafed, but all about, close at hand, in front and overhead, came the muffled clank of arms as the sentries stepped back into their places and gave the couple free passage. Now the outer of the three encircling walls loomed before them. Three gates placed at irregular intervals one behind another gave them access through small wickets. Oliver followed his guide through courtyards, galleries, and a maze of passages, up countless stairs, through rooms, past motionless sentries, on and on through a grey, discomfiting and oppressive stillness which gave him a strange feeling of being stifled by the huge blocks of stone.

He clenched his teeth: his nerves must not give way now: it was only the fatigue of the journey, he said to himself by way of comfort. They had now reached the wing of the castle occupied by the King. In a small cabinet the walls of which were hung all round with Gobelin tapestries and which appeared to have no door, Oliver's guide bade him wait. Before he could look round the room the soldier had vanished, and a moment later voices were heard. Oliver felt along the wall and tried to find, behind the hangings, the door through which they had entered and out of which his guide had probably just disappeared, and started back as the woollen hangings beneath his fingers yielded and he thought he had touched a human form. A moment later the arras beside him parted. Jean de Beaune stepped into the room and greeted him in his fat good-natured voice. Once more the arras was lifted and a very tall old man with a wizened face and watery red eyes, clad in well cut court dress, allowed the tapestry to fall behind him and stood still against the wall.

"Master Oliver," said Jean de Beaune, "before you see the King, Provost Tristan would have a few words with you concerning yon eloquent Franciscan."

Tristan l'Hermite, the Provost Marshal, who for thirty years had been torturing and hanging men in the King's name, and was more feared and cursed than any man in the kingdom, advanced unsteadily towards Oliver, and bending slightly forward, extended a small white and withered hand. His voice was soft and pleasant to the ear:

"Forgive me, Master, for having asked you here to-night to inform me of your investigations concerning this case. But I should like to despatch the courier to the parliamentary justices."

This pleased Oliver and raised his spirits, for he knew he was well prepared for the business. The mental lethargy with which the darkness of the hour and place and the sinister nature of the men about him had filled his soul and which he could not cast aside — a rare occurrence with him — gave way to a feeling of sheer joy at the idea of having Fate in his hands even here, of knowing something that others did not know, and of standing, as was his wont, a few steps ahead in the future, able to lead the blind whithersoever he pleased. This was the secret business and joy of his life, and he was here to apply it against the superior, dangerous, and possibly equally energetic power of this monarch. He behaved as he always did in dealing with powerful opponents whom he wanted to catch in his toils, and whom he always approached by tortuous ways, and, not looking his interlocutor in the face, he replied.

"Messire," he said civilly, though without any of the pompous tone of an official making a report, "the Franciscan monk, Antoine Fradin, seems to be one of those typically loquacious and gifted ecclesiastics whose activities in the pulpit are dictated less by religious zeal than by the pleasure they take in their own personal magnetism. So he is quite mediocre and harmless. It will suffice, and in this particular instance be quite adequate punishment, to forbid him through his Prior to preach again, and, if you will, to keep a sharp watch over him."

Tristan closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head from side to side.

"Many thanks for your information," he replied in friendly

tones, "but methinks vain priests are almost more dangerous to us than fanatics. Would not you too be disposed to think that the desire to wield power might easily make a demagogue of an orator? Would you have me conclude that you regard him as harmless only because you know him to be mediocre?"

Oliver raised his head and gave a low laugh.

"I felt his mediocrity was proved, messire," he answered calmly, "when I heard him pass so harmlessly from the vices of men to the vices of politics. From your very first question I gathered you wished to know whether his demagogic attitude was the result of personal vanity or the outcome of definite orders from a foreigner."

The Provost looked at him in surprise.

"That is precisely what we suspect, Master," he observed, after a short pause. "Am I to take it, then, that in your opinion the very nature of his sermons belies any such suspicion?"

Oliver cast a quick glance at him.

"By no means, messire, for I had an opportunity of speaking with him and examining him."

The Provost seemed bewildered and raised his voice:

"You mean I should take him into custody and subject him to examination under torture?"

"Messire," said Oliver, quite unmoved and glancing carelessly at his fingers, "I have had his person in my own custody and have subjected him to just such an examination under torture. My servant, a powerful fellow, played the part of Provost's assistant, and stood by ready to hang him. And all the poor fellow could tell me was Latin prayers."

Jean de Beaune laughed. Provost Tristan laughed. Behind the arras some one else laughed. Oliver turned round. The hangings on the wall moved, and Beaune sprang forward and pulled them aside. A man of medium height, about fifty years of age, entered. He wore a shabby hunting suit, and on his head was an old felt hat adorned round the brim with small leaden images of saints. His clean-shaven, somewhat bloated face was of terrifying ugliness. Above the sensual, brutal curves of his lips hung a huge crooked nose. The hard lines about the corners of his mouth betokened both irony and cruelty. Yet the eyes under their straight stern brows, surrounded by a net-work of folds and wrinkles, were extraordinarily beautiful, large, deep-set, un-

certain in colour, clever, penetrating and impenetrable, hard to meet and yet attractive.

He has my eyes, thought Oliver, as he kissed the hand of the King.

Provost Tristan and Jean de Beaune retreated in silence and stood by the wall. The King turned to the Provost.

"My friend," he said in deep mellow tones, "you will not send off the courier to frighten the poor little monk with your name. We shall follow the advice of our Flemish friend and allow the little monk's prohibition to preach to reach him along the usual episcopal channels through Balue, who from the first has regarded him as harmless. And now, my dear colleagues, I would have you leave us alone a while with our friend Oliver."

The two gentlemen bowed and retired. The King took a seat on one of the heavy high-backed chairs which stood against the wall, motioned Oliver to him and gazed at him long and earnestly with his piercing eyes. Then removing his hat he revealed a serene and lofty brow furrowed by thought.

"Oliver," he said slowly, passing a hand rapidly through his grey locks, "I knew you better before I had seen you. I recognised your genius, which is akin to mine own. I used it. I beckoned it hither. I recognised it again while I was listening and laughing behind the arras. But now I cannot see into you, Oliver. I cannot even discover any proof that I am your master. — I do not even know whether you are to be feared! Should I perhaps be acting more prudently were I to say that I read in your face and in your eyes what I wished to read and what I am used to reading?"

The Master, strangely moved by this question, felt a sudden deep attraction to the speaker.

"Oliver," continued the King, almost in a whisper, "for the moment your eyes are the eyes of a good man. — Believe me, friend, in my presence even good men have wicked eyes, or eyes that hate. Men call you the Devil, and I bade you, the Devil, to come to me. — Are you brave enough? Are you, le Mauvais, brave enough to be good? Have you any idea what such an example would mean to me? — Oliver, have you the courage to be good to such as me?"

"Sire," Necker replied, deeply moved, "I love you!"

Chapter 4

THE SATYR

THIS strange outburst of feeling on the part of the two men was never repeated. They felt the need of forgetting it and, in its stead, they revealed an attachment based on that deep understanding which is generally the outcome only of a long period of association and constant agreement. Theirs was such a swift and powerful welding of souls that, when separated, each one bore the imprint of the other. Each knew the other through himself and through his own vision. The King saw his intellectual power and the demoniacal versatility of his own political energy reflected in the servant. He knew that the latter strained every nerve to be of service, not only surrendering his capacity and intelligence but also devoting his spiritual gifts, which the monarch regarded as greater and more profound than his own, entirely to him. Oliver, for his part, knew the significance of every word, every glance, every smile and gesture of the King. At times he even read his thoughts and could always feel his sympathy or lack of it in the inmost core of his being. His joy in serving him was unparalleled; but both the joy and the service were only the outcome of a peculiar lust of possession. Oliver's very love for the King was, as it were, an invasion of a kindred soul which was at once royal and admirable. And while the King, thinking he possessed Oliver, was quietly possessed by him, Necker, imagining he knew how deeply he had penetrated the King's being, knew not how completely he had surrendered his own soul.

OLIVER lived with Anne and Daniel Bart, who had been made his body-servant, in a suite of rooms in the wing of the castle set apart for the higher officials of the palace. His duties to the King, however, who discussed every question of politics and administration with him, often led — as was the custom of the time — to his sleeping in the King's apartments, and almost always to his assisting him in his toilet. The King would also

often make him stand behind the arras or the panelling during audiences or conferences, and would demand his services at all hours of the day or night, so that he was but a rare guest in his own apartments. Anne bore his absence bravely and uttered not a word of complaint. But the Master's peculiar position, which forced him to observe a certain restraint even in his own rooms, isolated his lively young wife, who had been accustomed to a constant change of faces about her and to the conversation and admiration of her fellows. As, moreover, it was the King's pleasure not even to grant the Master leave of absence at meal times but to have him quite informally with him at the royal board, and eventually to make him his confidant and assistant in the gratification of his lusts and the arrangement of his various nocturnal debauches, the Master soon found Anne's fair features sadly distorted and pale with the distress she sought to hide.

Strangely enough the King, who soon expressed the wish to see Daniel Bart, never commanded Anne to present herself before him, although he apparently knew how attractive she was to men in general and to the Devil Oliver in particular. Even Jean de Beaune seemed to have forgotten the impression made upon him in Ghent by Oliver's wife, for he hardly mentioned her. Cardinal Balue alone — the only one of the King's three trusted councillors to regard the invasion of the Olivers with secret hostility and disdain — had in the early days of the Neckers' presence at Court once exclaimed: "They say, Master, that you have a very beautiful wife. . . ."

The King interrupted him sharply:

"They say, your Eminence, that you have no lack of fair penitents!"

Oliver did not understand the reason of the King's attitude. From time to time he begged leave for an evening or a night to be with Anne; and, when he perceived her depression, he told the King frankly that she was suffering from solitude and isolation and deserved a little consideration.

"You love your wife very much?" asked the King, turning away. Oliver tried to see his face.

"I love her like a father," he replied, "because I have made her what she is. I also love her as a lover — a great and twofold love."

"Almost a sinful love," said Louis without looking at him. "But what are we to do for her?" he added hastily. "Shall we give her as lady-in-waiting to the Queen? But Charlotte of Savoy knows full well that she can never live where I am, and you will hardly agree to being separated. So what shall we do?"

"We might," said Oliver hesitatingly, observing the King with secret anxiety, "we might perhaps be given apartments in this wing; or she might be granted permission to remain close beside me."

The King turned to face him. His look was the look of a satyr, but the expression lasted only a moment; perhaps it was only his eyes that had looked so bestial. In a second he was saying gravely, almost kindly:

"No, my friend, no; for if she were close to you she would also be close to me, would she not?"

Oliver turned ashen grey.

The King suddenly stood up and strode excitedly about the round turret chamber in which he used to work. His thin legs were encased in shabby, creased trunk hose with holes at the knees. Then, halting at the Master's side, he laid a hand on his shoulder and muttered:

"Oliver, it were better to fight against heaven above than against the hell in one's own body. — But look you, my friend, one fights notwithstanding. Be wise and help me, and do not mention this matter again."

He dropped his hand and strode over to the window through which the golden glory of sunny Touraine poured into the room. He seemed anxious to draw himself and his companion away from the subject, or his indefatigable brain was already at work on other matters. He turned round; his face was drawn and crafty as it always was when his thoughts had outstripped his tongue.

"What do you think of Balue?" he demanded abruptly.

Oliver, still shaken and distraught by the storm of evil thoughts that had surged upon his brain, forgot for a moment his usual caution and his habit of not committing himself with regard to persons in the immediate circle of the King. Hastily collecting himself, he answered:

"I think the Cardinal is of all three the most ambitious and so the least reliable."

Louis gave a faint smile and raised his right eyebrow in perplexity.

"Is this feeling of yours quite independent of personal vexation, Oliver?"

The irony of this question, which clearly emphasised the Master's error in tactics, immediately restored him to his senses and to his usual attitude when at work. He watched the King's face closely, trying to read his inmost thoughts from the flicker of an eyelid or the twitch of a muscle. At the same moment it flashed across his mind that if only he could make a shrewd beginning he might, through Balue himself and what he knew about him, wield a greater influence over Fate than could the vanity and intrigue of the Cardinal. He thought, moreover, that he might accomplish this sooner than he had dared to hope, possibly soon enough to ward off the danger which threatened Anne, and in any case not too late to punish if punishment were necessary. He therefore answered with a shrewd smile:

"Sire, feelings even when they are the outcome of vexation are less likely to err than reason; for reason would have bid me say: his Eminence is after myself your Majesty's most faithful servant."

The King frowned for a moment and then said calmly:

"You are right to answer me as you have done, Oliver; for I provoked such a reply. . . ."

He folded his arms and mused silently.

"I ought to have put my question differently," he observed after a while very seriously. "I ought not to have irritated you, for you are only confusing me now, and I must try to keep a clear head. You do not yet know what it is all about. It has to do with an important decision which the Cardinal invited me to make an hour ago. Unfortunately I did not get you to listen. I was surprised by his proposal and it even made me somewhat suspicious. But possibly it was only your subtle distinction between feelings and reasons that made me suspicious."

He was silent once more. Oliver looked at him expectantly.

"In short," the King continued, with noticeable impatience, "what I want to know is, do you think the Cardinal capable of consciously working against my interests? I am asking your feelings, my friend."

Oliver did not avoid his glance and answered thoughtfully:

“Conscious striving against the King’s interests is treachery. My feelings as well as my experience lead me to believe that every man who has risen from the ranks is capable of treachery. — But, sire, I cannot answer your enquiry without the help of my reason, and my reason tells me that it would be not only irrational but also foolish on the part of his Eminence to turn against you. In view of his intelligence, and his exalted rank, he no longer requires to play a double game; I would trust him.”

The King shook his head painfully.

“Your sophistry does not convince me, Oliver, and it occurs to me that it is not even intended to do so. Now listen. The Cardinal thinks it advisable that I should pay a visit to my cousin of Burgundy and, by means of the cajolery and protestations which become me so well and cost me so little, not only alienate him from the new league the princes have formed against me — and without him they would be not only headless but armless — but also stifle his personal suspicion of me. So if Johann von Wildt, the German freelance whom I hired for the recent rebellion in Liège, can be hailed as the liberator of that town a little later on, and can perhaps give the Duke plenty to do with his Burgundian lanceknights after the touching scenes I shall have enacted, my cousin’s chivalrous spirit will hardly be able to suspect or treat me as the wire-puller. Moreover there will be no lack of indignant gestures on our part against Johann von Wildt at the right time. — Well now, Oliver?”

The Master, with downcast eyes, and stroking his chin as he often did when lost in thought, seemed to be quietly reflecting. The struggle in his mind was fierce and tumultuous. He felt the blood rush to his brow, and he covered it with his hand as he thought the matter over feverishly. It was the first occasion on which he had been called upon to make a decision for or against the King, and he was conscious of the strength of his attraction towards him as well as of the paralysing proximity of that other soul which drew ever nearer and nearer with its dangerous eagerness. It was a hard task to have to suppress the few clear words which would have explained Balue’s dark game.

For a moment he shut his eyes and honestly examined himself. He saw Louis' lascivious lips and lecherous hands upon a woman's body, but it was not that of the fat peasant, Perrachon, with whom he usually slept, nor of any other of his favourite concubines — it was Anne! Oliver clenched his teeth so hard that the bones stood out from his thin cheeks. He had made up his mind.

"Well now, Oliver," repeated the King, "shall I listen to him?"

Slowly and deliberately the Master replied:

"The plan is a good one, but does the Cardinal know whether the Duke is willing to receive your Majesty?"

"I am the Duke's suzerain lord, if only on paper, and we are at present not in a state of war, even though we are not actually at peace; so that if only on account of his own prestige he cannot refuse to receive me, and if he were to do so, he would give me a free hand."

Oliver repeated thoughtfully:

"The plan is a good one — and yet," he added hastily, "it is also dangerous."

"Why, Oliver, have you any fears for my personal safety? Surely Charles of Burgundy is the last person to be guilty of a breach of hospitality — particularly against the sacred person of the King?" He grinned and showed his bad teeth. "He is not like me," he piped shrilly in Oliver's ear, "for with all my hospitality and cousinly love I should not care to advise him to come to me at Amboise however much I might wish him to do so!"

Oliver retreated a step or two. He felt if he were too near him the King might hear the fierce conflict raging in his brain.

"Sire," he said thoughtfully, "one should not go down into the den of a lion, least of all a strange lion. It avails naught for princes to visit each other trusting to moral supports for which they are either too heavy or which they have already sawn partly asunder themselves. — Least of all should your Majesty trust to smouldering fuses; bombs and revolutions are but poor sureties for the time of an explosion, and the young Duke is hot-tempered as a bull. If the people of Liège, who are even more unreliable than my friends of Ghent, and are armours to boot, brandish the red rag a little too soon, the young

bull will not stop to think what is the best object for his sharp horns. — Does his Eminence overlook all these possibilities? ”

The King once more walked to and fro in the room and, as he passed behind Oliver, he glanced up at him and searched him with his eyes. The Master felt he was doing so from his slight mistrustful pauses, but he did not stir, and the King took up his position by the window, his face bathed in the sunlight that was pouring in. Without turning round, he said gently:

“It grieves me, Oliver, that you are not so frank with me to-day as I am with you. You may have your reasons for behaving as you do, but beware lest it make me risk putting our relationship to the ordeal by fire.”

He turned sharply on his heels and caught the rebellious expression on Oliver’s face. He could not meet it and bowed his head.

“Oliver,” he said again, and his voice faltered a little, “you are the first man who has ever been a menace to me and whom I have not rendered harmless. — Will you be grateful to me for it? ”

“Yes,” rejoined the Master, deeply oppressed.

“Do you believe that Balue wishes to lure me into a trap? ”

“Sire,” cried Oliver, “do you imagine that if I knew it or believed it, I should be silent? ”

The King brought his face close up to Necker’s, whose brow had flushed red, and muttered:

“Yes, friend Oliver! ”

The Master shut his eyes to avoid the penetrating gaze of the King and to prevent himself from dropping on his knees and confessing everything.

“Sire,” he cried faintly, “can you suspect deeper knowledge or any evil intention beneath the honest, reasonable and obvious replies I have given you? ”

“Yes, friend Oliver, for you are clever.”

“Sire,” groaned Necker, “what do you expect of such cleverness? ”

“That I know not, Oliver. But this much I do know, that you are not using it, and that you would have answered differently if our conversation had opened differently.”

He turned round and went slowly towards the door; with his fingers on the handle, he paused and asked over his shoulder:

"Oliver, my friend, do you think Balue wishes to lure me into a trap?"

Necker, his face grey as stone, muttered through his teeth:

"Sire, I do not believe it."

The King threw open the door.

"Come and shave me," he commanded.

Oliver followed him into the dressing-room. On one of the walls of the small chamber hung a large and precious mirror of many facets, a present from the Republic of Venice, at the time when Louis was still friendly with their ally, the Duke of Savoy, his father-in-law, and with Sforza of Milan. The King sat down on a three-legged stool, opened his ruffle and threw back his head. His eyes looked as if they were closed, but beneath their lashes they watched every movement of the barber in the mirror. Necker, with a perfectly calm expression, was making the lather in a silver basin. When Louis' face was lathered, his lips moved as if he were laughing beneath the white mound of snow. Meanwhile the Master was dexterously stropping the razor.

"We are in a jolly mood," said the King, without opening his eyes. "We would fain be jolly this evening. And we would have jolly folk about us."

Oliver came forward with the razor and gently turned the King's head to one side.

"Oliver, we will ask our three friends to dine with us."

The barber nodded, and with one sweep of the razor shaved his master's cheek and chin. Scarcely opening his mouth, the King continued:

"But fat Beaune is the only one who is jolly when he is drunk. Provost Tristan is always dumb, and Balue gets coarse. You will be the fourth, Oliver."

He stretched out his lips in a hideous grimace as the Master worked the razor beneath his chin. Again he murmured, his eyes still closed:

"But you are in bad mood to-day, and that is why we should very much like you . . ." — he opened his eyes — "to bring your wife with you, Oliver."

For a second the blade was lifted from the monarch's throat. The King looked at it. Oliver bit his lips till his teeth were stained with blood, and Louis asked him gently:

"Is it very difficult, friend Oliver, to cut a throat?"

He smiled. Oliver leant slightly forward, but not a muscle of his face moved. He might have been deaf. The razor laid gently on edge glided smoothly over the King's cheek.

EVENING came. The sultry midsummer day was ending in storm, and the nerves of all were as tense as the heavy blue sky above. The King alone seemed to have retained his buoyancy and spirits. He was indifferent alike to the oppressiveness of the atmosphere and to Necker's dangerous and almost offensive silence, which — a strange symbol of the threatened and threatening landscape — masked the face of wrath. Or was his silence but the cautious outward expression of his restless soul, torn in two by a conflict of feelings and desires and striving to attain the necessary impetus one way or the other? Or was it the honest expression of a decision already reached in his mind? The King did not know. He had entrenched himself behind his good cheer in order to observe the other without betraying his curiosity. But Oliver had built up a wall of serious and deferent reserve combined with a not altogether genuine humility.

When Necker asked to be excused so that he might go and dress and also inform his wife, and retreated backwards from the King's presence in a manner neither expected of him nor demanded by ceremony, Louis could no longer conceal his doubts. He called him back. Oliver remained at the door, his head bowed and his hands hanging loosely at his side. The King, quickly overcoming his last scruples about revealing his uncertainty, beckoned him to approach with the usual familiar gesture, which, however, appeared somewhat forced. Silently and civilly the Master obeyed.

"Oliver," said the King carelessly, as he stretched out his hand and stroked the black velvet doublet of the barber in a friendly way, "before you thought of the possibility of any difference arising between us you once told me certain intimate little secrets of your past which to-day you might possibly like to consign to oblivion. But one of my gifts is an excellent memory. So remember that if your lady should suddenly be laid low of a fever, for example, it might be more unpleasant for you than a double dose of your concoction would be for her. I shall be quick to see by her appearance whether your lady has been tampered with through the medium of those cosmetic arts you

learnt in Florence." He gave a hideous, low laugh from a parting in the curve of his lips. "I mean only those negative additions you may be tempted to make, Master Necker; I do not, of course, forbid you to embellish her."

Oliver sniggered humbly — the obsequious laugh of the courtier.

"Your Majesty loves his little joke!"

"Go to the devil!" exclaimed Louis angrily.

"The devil goes to the she-devil, sire ——"

But when with downcast eyes he crept along the grey stone corridors already gloomy in the dusk, he was a different man. It was as if he were shaken by the deepest despair, because he knew that the fate of the future, which he might possibly have been able to command, could not stem the tide of events in the tragic present, but at best could only give him the opportunity of avenging a deed already done. And, because the inevitable disaster which threatened him seemed intolerable, hardly conceivable, he felt weak and helpless as he had never before felt in his life.

When he reached his own apartments, though he was outwardly calm again, Anne was terrified by his distracted expression.

"What ever has happened, Oliver?" she asked in alarm.

He gazed tenderly at her and kissed her.

"The game is growing very serious, my love," he said sadly, "and heavy stakes are being demanded of me."

She glanced at him anxiously, noted his shattered looks and immediately saw how helpless he was, for never before had she seen him so shattered. She also realised that his despair could not be connected with himself, for he never capitulated to any of life's difficulties without a struggle. Guided, therefore, by the instinct of love, she guessed the nature of the stake and of the danger at hand. But she only said:

"Are you sorry we came, Oliver?"

"I may be sorry *we* came," he replied emphatically. But quickly assuming the defensive, he added: "That is a difficult and vain question, Anne. That devil has already penetrated so deeply into me, or I into him, that only yesterday, only this morning, I should have regarded such a question as senseless, and even now I can only find a senseless answer to it."

And suddenly throwing his head back, he pressed his fists into his temples and howled like a wounded animal.

"It is my fault," he groaned, "it is my fault! I was blind; I was deaf!"

Anne, turning pale, shrank back, her eyes wide with horror. She was trembling.

"Oliver," she stammered, "Oliver, am I the stake?"

Necker looked at her; his face was still distorted, his eyes hard. "Great God!" cried Anne, in accents of the deepest woe, and sank sobbing into a chair.

"You must not cry, Anne!" exclaimed Oliver. "Your eyes must not be red to-night!"

She sprang up as if she had been struck and, dashing towards him, shook him by the shoulders.

"Oliver!" she gasped, "Oliver, do you want what he wants?"

He shook his head, and in his smile was such pain and agony that his wife closed her eyes and pressed herself to him.

"He wants what I do not want," he whispered, "but he is my King, my master. And, after all, what is it he does want? It is not much, Anne. He is simply doing us the honour of asking us both, you and me, to dine at his table to-night. That is all. Is that much, Anne? But we must dress. We must make ourselves look fine, Anne."

They went into the bedroom, and when he saw her young, beautiful form so completely familiar in the sweet intimacy of undress, he stretched out his arms as though to clasp her to him. But he did not move towards her, and she, with head slightly bowed, stayed where she was in a corner of the room.

"Anne," he muttered, and his hands sank slowly and as it were desperately to his side. "Anne, your spirit is of my spirit, and so it will remain. Your body is the body of my love, and it can be taken from me. Anne, if it is taken from me —"

He interrupted himself and began slowly and carefully to dress. His wife, never tired of observing his face, saw it grow ever colder and harder. When she was ready, he examined her critically. She wore a gown of heavy yellow figured brocade cut in Florentine style, as the Master loved it. The undergown, with long, tight sleeves, was laced about the breast and was covered by the voluptuous loose back and front panels of the

over-gown, which, cut low in the neck, revealed the ample curve of her breast. On her head she wore the horned coif of a burgher's wife, the veil of which fell down her back. She looked as beautiful as a picture by Ghirlandajo, and Oliver nodded approvingly. Squeezing her arm, and with a brutal grimace, he whispered in her ear:

"Anne, if they take you from me, if they take your body from me, they will make me loveless, yes, truly loveless, like the devil incarnate — and then, Anne, you, too, will be loveless like me . . . like my spirit . . . like thy spirit . . . ay, and like his spirit! And then we shall have him in a vice, Anne, you and I!"

She gave a little cry under the pressure of his fingers, and as she turned to open the door, he threw an arm about her neck and kissed her wildly on the mouth.

In the open gallery, along which they now passed, the wind whistled shrilly, and they stood still for a moment to let the air cool their temples. Flashes of forked lightning lit up the deep blue night. The thunder drew nearer.

"We are going to have a storm," observed Oliver, but as he was about to move on, Anne stopped him.

"Why is it your fault? Why did you say that, Oliver?"

"Because I told him about your loneliness and because he, out of kindness, Anne, in order to spare us, had never so much as mentioned your existence, and did not wish it to be mentioned."

"Then it is my fault, Oliver."

The Master stroked her hand.

"The question of whose fault it is, is as futile as the question of repentance," he said, with a smile. "You must not be so ready to condemn yourself. And to what, Anne? To the sacrifice?"

Then he added, in a different tone, moving as if to go on:

"You must not even harbour the thought, Anne. What is the thought in your mind? Is it a sacrifice to take a seat at the King's table? So come along."

Once again she held him back and drew him towards the stone parapet of the gallery as if she still wanted him to go in a different direction.

"I no longer understand you, Oliver," she murmured, and

her words were instinct with a deep fear, "and that is the most dreadful of all! I do not understand your strange way of talking. You must not confuse me and take away my support! I must know. I am used to defending myself or to attacking. I am your pupil! But I must not be uncertain."

Necker laughed as if he had suddenly been released.

"You are right, Anne, my clever little wife. But I cannot give you the watchword yet. My words are no stranger than this day has been; but I want you to know the danger; I also want you not to show that you know it. Do you understand me now? To-night you must use all your wits to keep in touch with me through your feelings. Then we shall both know when we have to defend ourselves and when we have to attack."

They went on. The rainless roar of the thunder rumbled round the castle rocks. Necker's wife pressed herself closer to her husband.

"Just one thing more, Oliver," she said, as they strode along. "He has not yet cast eyes upon me. Why should you be so frightened?"

"He has my eyes, Anne."

IN the lofty, oak-panelled dining hall the flames of the white wax candles guttered restlessly in the breath of the storm which was raging against the windows. The three councillors, the Cardinal, the Provost, and the Treasurer were seated side by side on a heavy bench at the massive oak table gleaming with silver, and were conversing in low tones as though they were awed by Nature's uproar and the gloom of the great hall. A kind of throne, covered with red brocade, which was the King's seat at the head of the table, was still unoccupied.

When Oliver appeared with Anne, the three men looked up in surprise. Then Jean de Beaune, recognising the Master's wife, rose courteously and advanced to greet her with friendly words. Provost Tristan also stood up, and a subtle smile played about his lips as he heard her name and bowed gallantly over her hand. The Cardinal, in keeping with his dignity, remained seated and gave an almost imperceptible nod when Jean de Beaune, with a few flattering words, introduced her to him. Nevertheless, his eyes beneath their bushy, grey, overhanging brows, scrutinised her with the daring glance of the *viveur*. He

was a big, portly man, about the same age as the King, and his round, full face was ruddy with health and exuberance. In his red biretta he looked dignified, intelligent and pleasure-loving, and while his full-lipped mouth seemed almost feminine above his retreating double chin, his short, broad nose, his prominent brow and the hard line of his eyes were of a disconcerting energy and pitilessness.

Anne's graceful presence worked like a cordial upon them. The men's tongues were unloosed, and the group about the table, now animated and self-confident, forgot the dismal depths of the hall. Even the storm outside seemed to have become less alarming, and provided an almost pleasant accompaniment. Oliver had left the room again, for at the private banquets, at which Louis preferred not to be disturbed by a display of ceremony, Oliver was accustomed to serve the food and drink, and to take the few hot dishes from the hands of the servants at the door of the hall. As he hurried hither and thither, filling the bulging silver ewers with various wines, bearing dishes laden with all manner of pasties, cold game, pies and fruit, and arranging them dexterously, Anne, with expressionless eyes but mind alert, sat listening, and, like an experienced fencer, warded off the gallantries of Beaune, the brief, polished innuendoes of Tristan, and the Cardinal's lascivious smile and look that seemed to pierce through to her skin. But from time to time she would glance over their heads to look at her busy and apparently unsuspecting husband, and then, whether her eyes met his eyes or merely saw his profile or his back, she received a secret response.

When he had finished arranging the table, Oliver took his place silently by his wife. Balue looked at him out of the corner of his eyes, and with raised eyebrows whispered a few words into the ear of Provost Tristan, who was sitting beside him. The Provost made an ironic grimace with his mouth, and the Cardinal, leaning across the table, said with a smile:

"You seem, Master Necker, not to have much appetite this evening. Has the storm gone to your stomach?"

Everybody laughed, and Oliver glanced up quickly.

"God forbid that I should be thus afflicted in your illustrious presence, your Eminence," he replied.

The gentlemen laughed louder than ever. The great double doors at the end of the hall were thrown open, and a voice announced:

“The King!”

They all stood up. Louis remained standing at the door which had closed behind him, and, rapidly surveying the company and the laden board, said in friendly tones:

“Good evening, comrades. I am glad to find you in such good spirits.”

Whereupon he advanced towards them with his usual short, quick steps, and Oliver went to meet him, leading Anne by the hand.

“Sire,” he said in a calm, loud voice, “I crave your Majesty’s grace and favour for Mistress Necker.”

Anne curtsyed; the King, carelessly extending his hand for her to kiss, said:

“Welcome to our merry company, madam.”

Then, turning from her, he rested his eyes on the Master, and, with a somewhat wry smile, remarked:

“We thank you, Oliver.”

Approaching the table, he nodded to the gentlemen round it and took his seat. The others followed his example, and the meal began. Oliver served the King.

For a few minutes silence reigned, as if the six were trying to read each other’s thoughts. Outside the storm blew louder and more threatening.

“Ah!” cried the King suddenly, taking a deep draught of wine, “my presence does not, as a rule, cut laughter short. When I was standing on the other side of that door, your bass, friend Jean, the Cardinal’s baritone, and Tristan’s tenor were ringing together in unison very pleasantly in my ear. Why is this chorus now dumb?”

“Sire,” replied the Provost, in his soft, aged voice, “without Master Necker we cannot produce any decent melody.”

“Are you not in good tone, my Oliver?” Louis enquired, winking his eye.

Necker poured some heavy golden wine from the Côte d’Or into the King’s gold cup and set before him a highly spiced dish of braised larks garnished with capers and mushrooms, which he acknowledged with a courteous bow.

"His Eminence has already diagnosed my complaint, sire, and says that the storm has driven my voice from its usual place to my belly."

The King laughed uproariously.

"Are you judging from the experience of your own portly belly, Monsignor?"

The Cardinal took a sip of choice wine from Upper Burgundy, and with eyes raised, kept it for a moment on his tongue, and then swallowed thoughtfully.

"No, sire," he replied, with a smile which revealed his strong yellow teeth. "I was arguing quite objectively and from most complicated data. The starting point of my reflections was the ever thinner belly of your Majesty."

"By our Lady of Embrun!" cried Louis. "I should have to possess the makings of a good Pope to be able to grasp the logic of your abdominal philosophy, Balue."

"Well," broke in Jean de Beaune boisterously, his face already purple with drink, "his Eminence based his reasoning on a theory long since exploded — that only thin cocks are any good, and incidentally has refuted it in his own person in a notoriously successful manner."

The King drank again, and his eyes sparkled strangely. Grasping his goblet in his hand, he exclaimed in a loud voice:

"You are in good form, my trusty councillors. Go on, go on. But how is my thin cock's belly connected with the crowing belly of Master Necker?"

The Cardinal drained the last drops from his goblet with outstretched lips, and, reaching out for the jug, said quietly:

"By means of the oft un-Christian doctrine of loving one's neighbour."

Louis grinned.

"But what connection is there between loving my neighbour and windy Master Oliver?"

The gentlemen did not dare to reply at once. Anne glanced uneasily at the Master, while he, with features quite unmoved, silently observed the King. The sudden silence that followed was unexpectedly broken by a deafening clap of thunder. The King started and crossed himself.

"Comrades," he said in altered tones, "you know full well that I am oftentimes a believer not for political reasons alone, but

from inner compulsion. For the moment my conscience would have me superstitious, and I would not have you answer my question now."

Balue and Jean de Beaune looked meekly into their goblets. Provost Tristan, who had been eating and drinking in silence, glanced ironically round the company and exclaimed with mild indifference:

"As the storm seems to have deprived both our Master Necker and others of speech, and his Eminence's somewhat obscure theories have provoked the displeasure of heaven as well as the discomfiture of our most gracious sovereign, I suggest the simplest solution of all the problems raised would be for Necker's fair spouse to be given the lead, and for us all to join in chorus in whatever melody she shall choose. That will appease even Heaven, your Majesty."

The King looked at Anne with a critical, almost discomfiting glance. Hitherto he had hardly noticed her.

"My Provost is right," he said deliberately. "Are you agreed, madam?"

Anne had turned pale and shrugged her shoulders in confusion. Oliver exclaimed scoffingly: "The Provost is always right, Anne! What would become of the King's most high justice if he were not?"

Turning to address the King, he added:

"Mistress Necker is as loyal as I am, sire."

Anne now smiled, and saw her smile reflected on the King's happy countenance as he leant across the table, took her hand and kissed it. The Cardinal watched the two out of half-closed eyes, and muttered pompously:

"Ab igne ignem."

Louis had again fallen back in his chair, and was grasping his goblet.

"Here's to your singing, madam, and also to your loyalty!" He drank and stroked his brow, but meeting Oliver's threatening glance, he swung the goblet of heavy embossed gold in his hand like a missile. Necker neither moved an eyelid nor allowed his gaze to fall. The King raised his arm as though he were about to fling his goblet at Oliver's head; but, checking the movement of his arm, he cleverly contrived to make the vessel drop into the Master's lap.

"From the King's mouth to his First Chamberlain," he said, his lips white with rage.

Oliver sprang to his feet as if the goblet had struck him in the face, and raised it aloft as if he would have liked to fling it back. Beaune's bass voice gave vent to a noisy drunken chuckle, while the Cardinal and Provost Tristan joined in uproariously. Anne, in deadly fear, laughed with them — a shrill soprano laugh that sounded like short cries of terror. The King opened his mouth as if he were laughing, too; but he did not laugh. On his face, distorted with rage, great beads of perspiration stood out, and his eyes did not stir from Oliver. The latter saw the parted lips of the rowdy company and of the infuriated King. He also saw Anne's pale profile convulsed with fear, and shouted aloud:

"Long live the King!"

It sounded like an affront.

"The instruments are tuned," yelled Jean de Beaune.

The King kissed Anne's hand once more, and laughed like a satyr. The storm had abated.

TOWARDS midnight the tide of drunkenness had ebbed. Jean de Beaune with glassy eyes was sitting on the floor, and with his forehead pressed against the leg of a chair was gurgling meaningless words. Balue had returned to an arm-chair at the back of the room, and was snoring softly with his mouth wide open. Provost Tristan was still sitting quietly at the table with his face looking older and more waxen than ever. Oliver, who, to the accompaniment of roars of applause from the three courtiers, had been crowned by the King with Anne's horned coif and decked out in her over-gown, was sitting bolt upright on a stool in his extraordinary head-gear, sober, alert and dangerous, looking like some priest of Astaroth. Anne, intoxicated and torn in two between her husband's will and the King's lust, weary with wine, fear and long-drawn tension, was sitting at Louis' bidding in front of him on the table, with her hair dishevelled and lack-lustre eyes, her face turned towards Oliver. The King rested his heavy head against the back of his chair and looked at her without touching her. His eyes wandered over her neck, her arms and the outlines of her ample bosom.

Suddenly he stood up and pulled her off the table. His

movements were quick and assured, as though he had shaken off his drunkenness. Without a word, he kissed the shoulders of Necker's wife with the calm assurance of a possessor, and while she was still taken by surprise, led her to the door, where he was confronted by Oliver, holding Anne's coif and gown in his hands, his face wild and hard set with determination. His wife slipped skilfully from Louis' grasp, and one short step sufficed to place Necker between him and her. The veins in Louis' brow stood out like whipcord.

"Back!" he cried, through clenched teeth. But Oliver did not stir.

"The lady begs you to excuse her, your Majesty."

"Back," cried Louis, raising a fist. Oliver fixed him with his glance.

"Sire, it serves no purpose to strike me," he said softly, and pushing Anne towards the door, he threw her clothes after her. In a moment she had slipped out of the room. The King shouted over his shoulder:

"Provost!"

Provost Tristan sprang to his feet. The sharp call to professional duty stripped off his drunkenness like a mask. With eager expectation he exclaimed:

"Sire?"

The Cardinal, too, woke up and came forward, yawning. Jean de Beaune alone was beyond being disturbed.

"Is the bird already chirping in the nest?" Balue enquired, glancing round him.

Oliver had thrown open the double doors and, bowing courteously, murmured:

"Sire, it is too late to set about hanging people."

Taken aback, Louis turned to face him and laughed aloud.

"You are right, Oliver, there is always time for that."

"Your Majesty called me," said Provost Tristan.

The King turned round.

"I would have had you behead the Cardinal, the fellow under the table yonder, and yourself into the bargain, because you were seated when I was standing up. But now let the Devil take me and see me to bed, because I have changed my mind. Good-night, comrades."

In dignified tones, the Cardinal replied:

"We wish you good-night, your Majesty, and the leader of the chorus, who has just disappeared, as a seductive Succubus — *voluisse sat est*, as Propertius says."

But Louis had already left the room. Oliver followed him up a winding, dimly lighted staircase to the living rooms above. Without a word he helped him to disrobe, set his fur-lined gown about his shoulders, and with a civil bow made as if to retire.

"No," said the King, "you will sleep by my side."

So saying, he went into the bedroom. The Venetian bed, with its richly carved posts and red velvet canopy, stood in the middle of the room on a carpeted dais raised on three steps. At the foot of the bed was a couch of cushions and skin which served for the Chamberlain on duty or for the bodyguard. The King strode over to the open window and breathed in the pure fresh night air.

"Go and lie down," he said, without turning round. Oliver obeyed. The silence was deep and oppressive. From time to time an owl hooted. A moth fluttered about the lurid light of the night lamp. But the shadow of the King, which in the soft moonlight that shone in at the window, stretched as far as Oliver, did not stir. Necker fell asleep —

"Oliver!"

He opened his eyes. He did not know how long he had been asleep. He was not even sure that he had been called. The shadow cast by the King had vanished, but his short, heavy breathing could be heard and the occasional creaking of the bed. The Master closed his eyes again; he was tired.

"Are you asleep, Oliver, when I am awake?"

"Master, I am not asleep."

Once more there was silence, but Oliver knew that the King's brain was alert, and he became wide awake. He seemed to share the tension emanating from the bedstead on the dais.

"Ought I to trust the Cardinal, Oliver?"

The Master did not answer at once. The beating of his own pulse resounded in his ears. Then he asked slowly in reply:

"Do you trust *me*, sire? Do you still trust *me*?"

Louis was silent. Oliver sat up.

"Sire," he pleaded eagerly, "tell me that you did not

appoint a Chamberlain to-night. Tell me that what happened did not happen!"

Louis was silent.

"Sire," cried Oliver in agony, "I beg you to let me go!"

The King said:

"To-morrow you will go with the Cardinal to Paris. You will keep watch over him and find out what he is aiming at. If necessary, you will go to Liége and see to it that Herr von Wildt does not let fly at an inopportune moment. And you will of course be at my side if I should have to go down into the lion's den."

"I shall be off to-morrow," Oliver muttered. "I shall take Bart and Mistress Necker with me, because I am used to their company and their help."

"You will take Daniel Bart with you," said the King, "but the lady will remain here."

Oliver sprang to his feet and stood on the lowest step of the dais. Louis sat up and looked at him.

"What do you want, Oliver?" he asked calmly.

"Sire," replied the Master in a hoarse voice, "if only I could tell you that the Cardinal —"

"My friend," interrupted Louis, "in that case I will find another excuse for sending you to Paris — or else to the oubliette."

Oliver mounted the next step of the dais, threatening him and quivering with rage.

"Sire, why are you taking my wife from me?" he panted.

The King fell back on his pillow and closed his eyes. His face seemed to have disappeared in the shadows.

"Oliver," he said softly and slowly, "do you imagine I am afraid you will kill me?"

Necker dropped on his knee and flung himself forward.

"Sire," he implored, "I belong to you. I kneel before you. Leave me my wife!"

"Oliver," the King muttered again without stirring, "do you imagine I can allow you to have feelings like other people, that you kneel before me and lay bare your naked heart like this? Are you to be vulnerable? Are you to be disloyal for a trifling affair of the heart?"

He said no more. When Necker straightened himself and

felt the King's hand, he seemed already to have fallen asleep; indeed, he seemed so fast asleep that his hand did not stir as Oliver pressed his lips to it.

Noiselessly Necker sat down on the top step of the dais and rested his head in his hands. His pulse ceased thumping, and he was able to examine his soul. Through the strange sounds that broke the silence, he heard his own quiet, steady voice repeating: "Do not surrender, do not surrender." He looked up. The King, with his face turned to one side, was watching him.

"Sire," he said slowly, "the Cardinal means honestly by you, but I will test him."

Louis hesitated before he answered, but in a moment he observed in muffled tones:

"You are stronger than I am. Once again you have become impenetrable, you devil with the magic cap."

After a while he added: "Go and sleep by her side. Go and take leave of her. Go, Oliver!"

Chapter 5

THE CIRCLE OF THE NIGHT

ONCE more the countryside lay scorching in the sun, as the little cavalcade rode slowly along the banks of the Loire towards Orleans; but the river brought no refreshing breeze. Time dragged wearily and drowsily by, like the blazing white country road beneath the hoofs of the horses.

The Cardinal had pouted disdainfully when the King, on taking leave of him, had appointed Master Necker as his companion, bidding him turn the Royal Chamberlain's familiarity with Burgundian affairs to account, and allow him to participate in the negotiations for the meeting. Balue had enquired maliciously how long His Majesty wished the business to last which was to keep the jealous husband out of the way — one night? five nights? twenty nights? or, what would be rather more difficult, for ever? But he had grown pale and confused under the angry gleam in Louis' eyes and his scathing reply:

"For the moment, your Eminence, we do not chance to be drunk!"

For the first hour, therefore, his mood had been peevish and rude, as he allowed the Master to ride at his side. But when a chance glimpse revealed the grey and gloomy countenance of Oliver, a sudden bright idea swept away his vexation, and he shut his eyes for a moment as if he were dazzled. He then began to talk. But Oliver was not communicative, wrapped up, as he was, in his own gloomy reflections. He was thinking of Anne, of his parting from her, and of all the thousand and one things that had been on the tip of his tongue, though not one word had been spoken. For he had dreaded to spoil that last night, that night of wonderful love, by telling her all that had happened, and of his momentous decision; and had merely informed her in the morning in a few curt words that the King, for very good reasons — in order to keep watch over Balue — had commanded him to go to Paris.

"Did he forbid me to go with you?" she had asked, turning pale.

"Daniel alone may accompany me."

That was all. But when he kissed her and gazed into her eyes, and with one compelling and concentrated glance conveyed to her everything there was to be said, he saw reflected in her pupils all manner of strange, shifting lights, cruel and yellow. When for the last time he turned round, he beheld an unfamiliar, thin-lipped courtesan's face devoid of smiles, pity, love or anxiety. It is the Fiamminga over again, he muttered to himself; and felt as if a dagger had pierced his heart.

He did not notice that the Cardinal's palfrey, which was as tame as a lamb, had slackened its pace more and more, and that quite unconsciously he was keeping his horse on a level with it. Already the small escort of armed men that accompanied them was some distance away, and Daniel Bart alone kept resolutely behind his master.

"Oh, the dust, the dust!" complained Balue, as he halted and fanned himself with his black red-ribboned hat and mopped his brow. Oliver and Daniel also drew in their horses.

"You do not look at all well, Master," observed the Cardinal, glancing quickly at him; "are you feeling ill?"

Oliver raised his head and tried to compose himself.

"You ask whether I am ill, your Eminence? Certainly not."

"Perhaps you are worried?" Balue enquired, feeling his way cautiously.

Necker cast a glance of surprise at him and, smiling craftily, replied:

"Maybe, Monsignor; but our men are getting ahead of us. Daniel, ride after them; tell them to wait for us."

Bart obeyed, and it was now Balue's turn to smile.

"Good, Master, very good. It is possible we may have all manner of things to say to each other which will not interest other people."

And he patted his horse's neck thoughtfully.

"We are both men of experience, I imagine," he began with some hesitation; "and we shall certainly neither surprise nor offend one another if we draw aside the veil of hypocrisy from a background which is not hidden from either of us. I may

therefore assume, Master Oliver, that you are not in any doubt as to the real reason for your sudden mission?"

"By no means," agreed Necker.

"I thought as much," Balue continued, gaining confidence. "In spite of my condition towards the end, I did not witness last night's dramatic scene with the bored cynicism I usually feel on such occasions; the terrible state of your feelings was obvious to me, and I marvelled at your powers of resistance."

"Ah," laughed Oliver, "yesterday evening I was a bit of a moral hero, was I not? And such a creature is a somewhat rare specimen in Louis' collection of human animals, isn't he, Mon-signor? Your own unimpeachable morality, for instance, never rises to such heights of heroism on account of the very celibacy of your calling!"

The Cardinal looked at him in some confusion.

"I don't quite understand the joke," he replied, shrugging his shoulders; "for I spoke in all seriousness and have by no means said all I have to say, and until this moment you did not seem to be in the mood for joking, Master."

Oliver rode on.

"The heat of the sun is unbearable. We cannot stand still in one place," he observed. "Besides, our men are growing impatient."

Balue followed, and when he had come abreast of him again, said sharply:

"You are not the kind of man to say Amen, So be it, without a struggle."

"How do you know?" Oliver enquired, gazing with half-closed eyes right out across the landscape; "and if you will excuse me, why should you want to know?"

The Cardinal laughed.

"It really seems to me, Master, as if you imagined I was sounding you about his orders."

Oliver shrugged his shoulders and suppressed a smile. They had overtaken the escort.

"Upon my soul," muttered Balue hastily, "you are mistaken, or you are trying to appear as if you did not understand that I am pleased to see your opposition. . . ."

Oliver gave a low laugh and looked at him openly. The Cardinal, somewhat disconcerted, shook his head.

"What are you laughing at, Master?" he asked, with some uneasiness. "What . . ."

But Daniel Bart was once more so hard on their heels that he thought it wiser to hold his peace, and they rode on to the accompaniment of harmless chatter. But Balue, observing his companion out of the corner of his eyes, noticed that a disagreeable and enigmatic smile still played about his lips. He coughed anxiously.

The graceful silhouette of the castle of Blois now rose on the horizon against the sunny blue of the midday sky. Soon they entered the town, and during their two hours' rest were the guests of the Bishop, who bored the tired and tongue-tied Balue by endless protestations of devotion. During the afternoon, when the little cavalcade were once more trotting northward in a slightly fresher breeze, the Cardinal sought no opportunity for continuing his confidential discussion with Oliver. In Orleans they took up their quarters for the night at the residence of the King's lieutenant.

"Perhaps my Daniel could share a room with your secretary," suggested Oliver casually. Balue nodded his consent, and chose for himself and the Master a chamber separated by a small passage from the room in which their personal attendants were to sleep. On the plea that he and the Chamberlain were tired after their journey, he declined the invitation of their host, and the two dined in their own apartment, attended by a priest and Daniel Bart.

The Cardinal leant back, well satisfied, with a crafty look on his face, and the Master ordered Bart to clear the things away and not disturb them again. Bolting the door behind him, he turned to face his companion. He was smiling again.

"We shall not be disturbed now, your Eminence. We shall be as quiet as you could possibly wish."

"Don't you wish it, too?" Balue enquired, growing suspicious once more. "In your own interests you ought to avoid anything that could possibly prevent me from speaking my mind freely."

"In my interests?" laughed Oliver. "Your Eminence has always struck me as the last person to put in a good word for me, not to mention a word too many."

The Cardinal tapped the table impatiently with his fingers.

"Master, Master, my readiness to help is nothing to do with the King's creature, which until yesterday I thought you were, but with the offended and outraged husband who has the courage not to forget — nay, more, who has the courage to act!"

Oliver raised his brows cynically.

"Your words, most honoured sir, do not sound very Christian. What leads you to believe that I am not still Louis' creature? Don't be so hasty in throwing your cards on the table! Or when you pose as the opposite of one of Louis' creatures, are you merely playing a part?"

"I think," said Balue cautiously, "that you misunderstand me. I am a servant of the King and conduct his foreign policy. But if, in spite of this, I have maintained my spiritual independence and am on the alert for men who have not fallen victims to his hypnotic power, it is only because I can foresee the possibility of a certain sequence of cause and effect which might sooner or later bring me into conflict with his policy."

Necker leant across the table and stared straight into the eyes of his companion, whose smile was somewhat forced.

"Monsignor," he said deliberately, "if only for this wonderful paraphrase of the idea of treason, you deserve to be given the Chair of Rhetoric at the Sorbonne; that is to say, if you were not already a Cardinal. I warned you not to throw your cards down too soon."

Balue flushed with anger or anxiety; but suppressing the hot words that were on the tip of his tongue, he forced himself to keep silence. After a while he observed ironically:

"You have a lively imagination, Master, which is probably due to the calling you used to follow. But if you are hoping to strike a bargain and, in exchange for the white body of your wife, to throw the grey head of the Cardinal into the jaws of the King, allow me to inform you that it will need a far greater effort than you have already made to read my cards."

Oliver leant still further forward, chuckling, with his hands resting right and left on the corners of the table. His chest and head were almost lying on the polished surface of the table.

"Shall I make this greater effort, your Eminence, or shall I wait until you are in Paris and Brother Viole brings you the latest tidings of the Count of Crèvecoeur — possibly the answer to your message about your promising attempts to induce the

King to become the self-invited guest of my Lord of Burgundy?"

Balue started as if he were about to spring to his feet, but he seemed to be chained to the table, and clenched his jaws. Oliver drew himself up; his expression was grave.

"Good God!" he cried, "I might have flung the Cardinal's head to his royal master long before I knew that it was actually grey. One should not regard rhetoricians as harmless, Mon-signor. They often chatter too much, and possibly Jacques Viole is just as glad to get into the pulpit as that good fellow, Brother Fradin, who for the moment has been forbidden to wage his war against human frailty and passion."

The Cardinal stared him full in the face.

"Let us stop speaking in parables, Necker," he said, "and say plainly what we mean. We will not enquire into the worthless rumours by which you have acquired your knowledge. One thing is certain — you know enough. And you have had this advantage not only during the present interview, but for several weeks, and have had time to decide upon your victim. Have you condemned the King or myself?"

Oliver was silent. Balue smiled cunningly.

"Do you imagine, Master, that I do not know how you have chosen? Do you imagine I am not aware that our conversation would have been the same in every detail even if I had not opened it by luring you over to my side? Come, Master Oliver, I am right, am I not, in supposing that because you cannot set a man-trap beside your marriage-bed, you are digging a wolf-trap behind it?"

Oliver stared at him.

"The King suspects you," he said shortly.

The Cardinal started up in great excitement.

"Do you still wish to fool me, Master? Are you not aware that you too have committed yourself, for you have given me to understand that you have told the King nothing of my alleged relations with Brussels? That is quite enough to drag you down with me should I fall."

Oliver shrugged his shoulders.

"You have forgotten your thinking-cap, your Eminence," he replied calmly. "It is through me that the King suspects you."

"Do you wish to imply that he sent you with me in order to watch me?"

"Yes."

Balue laughed mockingly.

"That might perhaps be conceivable if the order had been given and carried out before last night's little scene."

"You are wrong," exclaimed Necker, "for then it would have been as superfluous as our tiresome journey; for in that case you would probably have been sitting in a far colder place, Monsignor."

"Why are you leading me round and round in a circle, Master?" the Cardinal demanded irritably.

Oliver shook his head.

"I am doing nothing of the sort," he said with a smile. "I am merely giving you irrefutable proof of my straightforwardness. What I want you to see is that all manner of things depend upon me. So you had better keep on the right side of me, for I am the only person who can lure the King into your trap. But do not try to get round me with sentimental arguments as you have done up to the present, nor with eloquent circumlocutions which have just as little effect upon me as — say — open bribery. But come down to plain political facts."

The Cardinal examined him suspiciously:

"If I understand you aright, Master, what you want me to do is to explain to you the policy by which I am guided and the nature of the forces at my disposal. But what guarantee have I that you will not apply your knowledge on behalf of the King?"

"Your own person," Oliver retorted, without hesitation. "Your very presence here, because you have not been consigned to the oubliettes, but are actually in Orleans, and because tomorrow you will be in Paris, and I with you. If all this were not so, your Eminence, it would simply mean that what I knew had been sufficient to make the King in Amboise set the approved methods of Provost Tristan in motion, instead of using your humble servant to get the information he wanted. Surely you must see that!"

Balue stood up and walked thoughtfully up and down the room. At last, coming to a stand before the Master, he said:

"Very well, Master, question me."

Oliver smiled and stroked his chin.

"I see ever more and more clearly," he said, "what a diplomat the King is losing in you. And my admiration is all the more valuable seeing that I have had the opportunity of watching Rodrigo Borgia's great Hispano-Roman school of diplomacy at work. I advise you to vote for him at the next conclave, and to be his secretary of state, Monsignor. Rome loves you, because you so bravely destroyed Charles VII's Pragmatic Sanction, which was so favourable to schism, and thus quite honourably obtained for yourself the Cardinal's Hat and for our truly Christian King the supreme title of His Most Christian Majesty. Rome could not find a more pleasing activity for you than the difficult, not to mention dangerous, task of depriving him of his temporal supremacy. And surely this is what you want, your Eminence?"

Balue listened with a sour expression on his face, and was not in the least surprised by the sudden question.

"I am not the only one to want it," he replied coldly.

"I know," agreed Oliver, "and the King is not ignorant of the fact that the League of the Public Weal is to be revived."

"It has been revived."

"And you are a member of it, your Eminence?"

The Cardinal raised a deprecating hand.

"Your question is somewhat inquisitorial, Master."

"Forgive me," laughed Necker, as if he were thoroughly happy and free from care. "Burgundy is, of course, the leader, as he was before. As Louis most aptly remarked, he is the League's head and arms — and he probably knows more than he should, Monsignor! Burgundy can certainly reckon on the support of the Duke of Brittany, who is always ready to be in opposition. As you know, the King is at the present moment engaged in wresting two of his eastern fortresses from him. And, if it is a matter of compassing the doom of the Valois, Armagnac in the south will also be with us. These are not particularly secret facts, are they? And what about Charles of France, the King's only and therefore by no means loving brother? Has the old hatred been annulled by his new title of Duke of Normandy?"

"No, he belongs to the League."

"Charles of France belongs to the League," repeated Oliver

thoughtfully, "and Edward of England is Burgundy's father-in-law! Am I not guessing much too quickly, your Eminence, how the League expects to reach its goal?"

Balue was silent.

"And what about Nemours?" Oliver demanded suddenly, "the Duke of Nemours, whom the King pardoned? Is the old hatred still there?"

"Yes, he also belongs to the League."

Necker compressed his lips.

"Charles of France . . ." he mused, "Jacques Nemours. . . . And who else besides ourselves of those gentlemen who belong to the League is still in the service of the King?"

Balue was silent.

"Very well," said Oliver patiently, "let me confine my question to the Grand Master of the army and to the Constable, both of whom belonged to the first League and who now are the only ones among those that were pardoned, to hold high and important offices."

The Cardinal turned away, and, stepping up to the window, stared out into the night.

"Count Damartin does not belong to the League," he replied, and then he added in low tones and face averted, "but we can reckon on Saint Pol, particularly at the moment of success, in spite of his personal dislike of Burgundy and the Duke's mistrust of him."

"Not the Grand Master, but the Constable," muttered Necker. Then he, too, rose and, with his usual noiseless steps, went up to the window, and stood close beside the prelate.

"Charles of France . . . Nemours . . . Saint Pol . . . Balue . . ." he muttered.

The Cardinal started and turned round, and the two men stood facing each other so close together that their bodies almost touched. Balue threw his head back involuntarily, secretly annoyed, for Oliver was not looking him in the eyes, but was staring thoughtfully without moving an eyelid at his brow.

"And why do you leave yourself out of the reckoning?" he demanded at last in irritable tones.

"I?" Oliver smiled and retreated a step. "I cannot be mentioned in the same breath as these exalted personages. I only come now."

He grew more serious.

"It is a good thing you have answered me, your Eminence. I can now think things over; I can reckon the forces against the King and estimate his strength — the League is strong, Monsignor, and it is all the more formidable because it extends into the very circle of Louis' intimates, possibly into his bed, perhaps even into his own soul. Yes," he continued, gazing with a look more searching than ever at his companion, "let us be frank, Cardinal: you, the Constable, and even my unworthy self, might make the League fatal for the Valois, more fatal than the English tornado and the great Bedford were for his father; for Charles VII had his Xaintrailles, his La Hire and his Dunois, who supported him through thick and thin. But Louis of Valois' minister, constables and chamberlains are ready to attack him from behind his back at the right moment, when the League of his old and new enemies have him bound hand and foot."

Oliver had spoken in a loud voice. Balue grew pale and retreated to the wall, holding up a deprecating hand. Step by step Necker followed him with his scorching gaze, and once again his words showed no mercy, but were like the crack of a whip:

"Let us be frank, Cardinal. It is a good thing for conspirators to bare their souls to one another; it cements their union. What were you, your Eminence, before Louis of Valois discovered your gift for intrigue? You were a minor cleric, the child of insignificant parents. You must have been forty before your ambition found a tool in the Bishop of Angers, whom you honoured, not because he was worthy of honour, but because he was one of the King's councillors. Through him you were made a Canon, through him you were appointed Treasurer to the Chapter, and succeeded in attracting the King's attention and becoming his secretary and almoner. Then you were in a position to fling your tool away; you brought your benefactor into disgrace and became Bishop of Angers and royal councillor in his stead. You became a Cardinal and a minister, and were promoted to the highest offices by Louis as few have been promoted. Very well, Monsignor! It is impossible to get a royal benefactor into disgrace. But he can be betrayed! What now, Balue? Do you wish to be the viceroy of Burgundy or of England in

France? And after that, Balue? You will still have five or ten years of life, though you are no longer young. . . .”

The Cardinal’s face grew ashen grey, and he raised his fist.

“Knave!” he panted. “How dare you? . . .”

Oliver did not flinch.

“I only dare to be honest,” he said coldly; “and now enough about you and Count Saint Pol, who received his Constable’s sword from the King’s own hand. Let us come to the third and lowest — myself. For you and the rest are at least traitors with a spiritual object in view, politicians or honest enemies. But I am the servant of the bed-chamber, who hands over the key of the door.”

Imperceptibly the wrath and secret confusion depicted on Balue’s round, red face had given place to friendly smiles.

“So, Master Oliver, without circumlocution or stipulations, you are ready to work with us to lure the King into the ducal camp?”

He extended a hand, but Oliver took no notice of it.

“If only you had the grace to remain angry, Balue,” he said contemptuously.

Then, turning on his heel, he began to undress.

It was about this hour that the King left the banquet he had given in honour of Stefano Nardino, the papal legate and Archbishop of Milan, and repaired to his room in the tower, dismissing the chamberlain on duty with instructions that he was not to be disturbed, as he was going to work. But as soon as the door had closed behind the courtier, he slid back the panel in the oak wainscoting behind which lay the winding stair leading to the secret chamber above.

Anne heard his steps, and sat up alertly.

When, immediately after Oliver’s departure, Monsieur de Beaune had informed her that His Majesty wished to receive her that evening, and had presented himself half an hour before, and, with the same courtly gravity, had led her away, she never for a moment lost her calm assurance — the resolution with which the Master had inspired her for wielding the weapon of her body. She was taken to the upper room of the tower, the circular chamber of the King’s debauches. With a little pout, she became even more self-possessed — the room was nothing

more than an alcove. The windowless walls, covered with yellow brocade embroidered with gold, stretched right and left in their monotonous colouring like a tent or the canopy of a bed. The floor was covered with deer-hide the colour of gold, but only a small strip of it was visible close by the walls. Soft bright-coloured silk rugs lay about, almost concealing the outline of the plinth, on which the broad, low couch, covered with blue fox skins, was placed. Dim lamps filled with sweet scented oil emitted silver blue lights which, reflected in the facets of the Venetian ceiling mirror, looked like pearl drops hanging from a fairy moon.

As the room contained no chair or tuffet, she took a seat on the bed, which, yielding beneath her weight, made her sink back voluptuously on her back. The fine white hairs of the skins, which, like the rest of the room, had a faint, bewildering scent of civet and myrrh, caressed her neck and softly tickled her hands. Raising her eyes to the ceiling, she beheld, in the mirror, her outstretched form, and the alluring opalescence of her face. It pleased her to look at herself, to move her limbs under the smooth, bright velvet of her gown and to fondle her breast and hips; and eagerly she watched to catch the voluptuous smile on her lips. When she was tired of amusing herself in this way — not even surprised that no disquieting or distressing thought had intervened to undermine her courage and the self-reliance of her body — and had allowed her head to droop lazily on one side, she espied on a small table, the surface of which was covered with bleached pig-skin, a huge silver platter laden with small golden bowls full of the choicest viands — delicate salmon and bittern pasties, cubes of game soured in the juice of purple muscatels and ginger, lampreys flavoured with marjoram and rosemary, cakes soaked in liqueurs in Florentine style, goblets containing heavy, sweet wines from Languedoc, Spain, Sicily, Cyprus and Hungary, and finger-bowls filled with almond-scented water. Anne, her appetite sharpened by the activity of her senses as she lay on the bed, reached out to the food, and, without waiting to choose, drained three or four of the goblets. Then she fell back once more, her mouth full of the stimulating savour of spices, and her brain numbed by the wine and the sweet scents, shades and soft stuffs about her.

The sound of a panel being slid aside brought her to her

senses, and a step swiftly ascending the stairs made her heart beat. She raised herself to a sitting position with her arms behind her, and her hands resting on the skins. Looking round to find the door, she saw in the wainscoting to her left a small aperture the height of a man, and leaning forward, she smiled. The King was standing in the room and gazing at her gravely, almost wonderingly.

"You have a different smile to-day, madam," he said gently, not moving from where he stood.

She did not answer, but opening her mouth a little wider, half closed her eyes and threw her head gently back. Louis, gazing at her mouth, raised his brows.

"Do you recollect, madam," he asked coldly, "that no later than last night you were lying in your husband's arms?"

Anne opened her eyes wide, but still continued to smile.

"Sire," she said, raising herself to her knees, "as you will not kiss my hand, allow me to kiss yours."

The King hid his hands behind his back.

"Madam," he repeated a little louder, "do you recollect that only twenty hours ago you were lying in your husband's arms?"

She smiled more broadly than ever, and her eyes grew hard.

"Indeed I do, your Majesty — and within twenty hours your command has placed twelve hours of the road between him and this room to which you have summoned me."

She allowed herself to sink back once more. Louis pulled a grimace.

"I thank you for having come, madam. And may I ask whether you were pleased to come?"

"Sire," rejoined Anne mockingly, "if it stimulates you and you like to hear it, I am pleased to answer that I came with a bleeding heart."

Louis grinned and pointed to the food.

"But in spite of your heart, you had an appetite? And yet," he continued, growing serious again, "what if I now told you to undress?"

"I should do so," she replied calmly.

The King folded his arms and looked down on the floor. Then he exclaimed roughly:

"Undress, woman!"

Anne stood up, stepped on to the plinth of the bed, and with fingers that never trembled, unloosed the fastening of her sleeves and bodice. When her white skin shone through the opening in her clothes, the King's lips quivered.

"That will do, madam," he said in smothered tones, and turned his head away, "I am convinced of your willingness, but marvel how it came to be. I have strange thoughts."

He looked her straight in the face.

"Tell me, Mistress Necker, would you have been as willing yesterday?"

Anne folded her hands across her naked breast and remained standing.

"Yes, sire," she replied.

Louis raised his head in astonishment.

"If I had forced the Master to go away and had made you follow me, you would have given yourself to me? — without resistance? Tell me the truth, madam."

Anne smiled a little stiffly.

"If the Master had been removed by violence, I should have been just as willing yesterday as I am to-night."

The King took a short step towards her, but as if an invisible hand were restraining him, he retreated to the wall, his brow furrowed by the working of his brain.

"Madam," he asked softly and almost with embarrassment, "has any other man ever possessed you besides him?"

Anne shook her head; her face had changed. Smooth, white and impassive as a mask, it seemed not to belong to the palpitating body on which it was set. It was as if her senses were looking far away, watching and groping towards communion with something outside the encircling wall of the room.

The King examined her intently.

"Mistress Anne," he said at last in a whisper, as if he were afraid that the sound of his voice might disturb other delicate and important vibrations, "Anne, have you ever in your life thought, or acted, or tried to differentiate between good and evil, without him?"

She shook her head.

"Is his will always in your will and his soul always in your soul?"

She nodded.

"Even now?"

She nodded.

"In your body, too, even if it gave itself and had given itself to me?"

In a tortured, dreamy, almost hollow voice, she replied:

"Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes . . ."

The King looked above and beyond her, and his expectant gaze seemed to be searching the room for Necker. At that moment he would have been glad to see him in the flesh; he would not have been surprised; it would actually have freed him from the disquieting delusion of his intangible presence which now filled him with confusion. But his eyes only met the dull gold uniformity of the walls, the motionless woman and behind her the lifeless voluptuousness of the bed, like some ironical and irritating fresco. Involuntarily he raised his hand and clasped the cross. I do not hold him, I do not grasp him. God be with me! Is he the Evil One? Does he love me? Is he tempting me? Does he wish to destroy me? What does he want? Then aloud he asked:

"What does he want?"

Necker's wife said not a word. The King leant forward, stretched out a hand and touched her arm. She shrank from him.

"I only wanted to make sure that your body was really there before me," he said gently, as if in apology, and stroked his brow. For some reason Anne blushed and gave this strange reply:

"Sire, you have his eyes."

She spoke the words in a low, passionate voice. Louis smiled with unusual kindliness.

"The King loves Oliver, the King therefore loves you too, Anne. Will you forgive me both for this conversation and for this room, Anne?"

She shrugged her shoulders in confusion. He bowed his head and said even more gently:

"Would you kindly tell me whether the Master would be surprised at our conversation and our appearance?"

"Yes," she answered, deeply moved.

The King's hand groped for the mechanism of the door in the wall and opened it.

"I am surprised, too," he said gravely. "We do not even

know ourselves, and yet we fancy we can know our neighbour. And do you believe," he added, bowing over her hand, "do you believe that he would be pleased now?"

"Yes," whispered Anne, as her eyes filled with tears. The King was already standing in the opening of the door.

"I don't know whether he is worthy of this joy," he said over his shoulder, "neither do I know whether his mind is set on good or evil; but I do know that I am worthy of the joy I now feel. Sleep well, madam, and keep silence."

He closed the door behind him.

At this very hour Oliver asked through the darkness:

"Are you asleep, Monsignor?"

"I am not asleep, Master."

Necker wiped the sweat from his brow.

"What will happen to the King's person?" he enquired in smothered tones. "Will his life be in danger?"

He heard the Cardinal stir in astonishment.

"That is a strange question," he replied. "Is your conscience already troubling you? But comfort yourself, the League is not so stupid as to have the death of the King and the horror of Europe on its shoulders. The manner of his treatment and the length of his confinement will depend on circumstances, above all on Burgundy's mood. Meanwhile, we may perhaps be able to have a little influence both on circumstances and on Burgundy's mood."

He gave a hideous laugh, and Oliver, with a sudden access of wild hatred, exclaimed:

"Aren't you afraid that I will have you locked up here and ride back to Amboise this very night?"

Balue laughed.

"No, I am not afraid of that. I think you would only disturb things there, and would not be likely to be admitted so soon. Allow me to inform you that the King told me somewhat indiscreetly this morning that the longer I availed myself of your services the better. So just tell that to your conscience."

Oliver did not reply, and once more, as in the tortured hours of sleeplessness he had just gone through, he buried his teeth in his pillow to prevent himself from crying out.

Chapter 6

THE SOUL'S STRUGGLE

COLDLY and methodically the Cardinal was working in Paris to achieve his object. Although, through having won over Oliver, he was now certain of success, he advanced cautiously and deliberately step by step, reckoning only with hard facts which would conceal even from the sharp eyes of the King that he was the moving spirit behind them. He sent messages to Amboise announcing a suspicious concentration of troops on the frontier of Picardy; disquieted Louis, whose army was busy in the west, by calling his attention to the danger of an attack by Burgundy in his rear, and informed him that the Duke in person was in the Somme region. Finally he conveyed to the King a sort of written ultimatum from Burgundy threatening retaliation for the prolongation of the campaign against his Breton allies by an attack on Picardy.

As soon as he arrived in Paris, Oliver had found a good excuse for obtaining from Balue an introduction to the Prior of the Franciscans, and without much difficulty had succeeded in setting Brother Fradin free from supervision. He made use of the grateful fellow to keep watch on the Cardinal's movements, and also to check the careless, almost suspicious frankness with which the latter had treated him ever since that night in Orleans. Thus he learned that Balue both towards himself and in his messages to the King was acting quite honestly. In a secret message, which he sent to Amboise, Oliver confirmed the report about the threatening situation on the Somme, without referring to the question of the personal meeting. He also learnt through Fradin that the suspicions of the Burgundian government and particularly of the Duke himself against Balue had not by any means been allayed, but that behind his zeal they suspected the guiding hand of the Valois and very much doubted whether the King would ever present himself. Finally the monk assured Oliver that the Cardinal had not led Burgundy to understand that there would be a revolt of the people

of Liège fomented by the King. The ducal representatives in the town had, it is true, informed their government of fresh intrigues probably hatched by the agents of France, but it was certain that neither the Duke nor his councillors had any idea of the acute danger of rebellion or of the part to be played by the German freelance with his mercenaries as the agent of the King.

Oliver was all the more at a loss to understand this clever move on the part of the Cardinal, seeing that Balue, even in his conversations with him, had apparently overlooked the problem of Liège. On the day on which Jean de Beaune had presented himself to the prelate with the King's command to inform the Duke immediately that he would pay him a friendly visit and, with this object in view, to repair at once to the headquarters of the Burgundian army, Necker asked the Cardinal, whose face was radiant with triumph:

"Are you remembering Liège, your Eminence?"

Balue did not seem the least embarrassed.

"Of course I am remembering Liège, dear Master," he replied, with a cunning look; "do you imagine that I am overlooking the most important factor?"

"The most important factor?" Oliver exclaimed in astonishment. "Why, you have neither discussed it with me nor, as far as I am aware, corresponded about it with the Count of Crèvecœur."

The Cardinal smiled.

"Certainly not with Crèvecœur, Master Necker. And as for discussing it with you, I thought I would wait until such time as you put the necessary questions to me. Aware, as I am, of your intelligence, I have been expecting these questions for some considerable time. If you had not asked, I should have been able to keep silence without acting in any way unfairly by you."

"Many thanks for your good opinion," Oliver replied, shrugging his shoulders. "But I don't even pretend to understand your remarks. The danger is that in the event of the King being compelled against his will to make a prolonged stay at Burgundian headquarters, the slow fuse already smouldering in Liège will cause an explosion while Louis is still a prisoner."

Balue rubbed his hands in satisfaction.

"There is not only a danger of this, my friend," he replied with a grin, "it is a certainty, and the explosion in Liège will occur, not after the King has been a prisoner for some days, but on the third or fourth day of his visit — that is to say, if we can rely on the Constable, who is managing everything from his headquarters in Luxemburg."

Oliver sprang to his feet in horror.

"But this means death or life-long imprisonment for the King!" he cried.

"Why get so excited?" Balue asked calmly. "The Duke dare not kill his suzerain lord, and in any case you must understand, Master, that both in the eyes of the world and even in the eyes of the King, both you and I can establish a sort of alibi. Owing to the expected rebellion in Liège and other forces over which we have no control, we shall cease to be responsible for the fate of the King, for until the arrival of the bad news they will not treat him very differently from a guest and in any case will extort their little concessions from him with all due courtesy. Thanks to our perfect organisation, I shall be the first to receive the tidings, and shall be able to turn them to good account in convincing the Burgundian leaders of my personal innocence." He winked. — "For all Europe knows that the King of France likes to wend his darksome way alone. — Now you surely know all you want to, Master."

Oliver did not answer at once but walked thoughtfully to and fro. He marvelled at the genius of this scarlet Judas, but he also marvelled at himself; because his will refused to mate with the other's will, far though he had already gone with him. Have I not yet made up my mind? he asked himself. Am I still in doubt as to whom I shall condemn? Am I veritably possessed by the Valois? Am I to forget his crime? Am I to find pitiful excuses for it or justification for my doubts? — He bit his lips. He knew that if he returned he would be lost in his dealings with a devil greater than himself — And yet . . .

Involuntarily he turned over the Cardinal's revelations in his mind, as though he had overheard the secrets of an enemy. He examined the apparently perfect plan which seemed impervious to every thrust of chance, trying to discover vulnerable points, gaps and weaknesses. He turned it over and over in his mind trying to think of some trick by which he might turn it

against Balue so as to hoist him with his own petard. — But why, why? Why was he waiting for the eleventh hour? Why did he not want to tell the King beforehand, or confess to him there and then that time was very short?

Oliver could not answer these questions in his heart nor did he force himself to a decision, for his clear-sighted instinct had already perceived the reasonableness of his own conscious uncertainty. So he said nothing to the Cardinal of the obvious reply that was on the tip of his tongue — that in his case the plan could hardly be regarded as a proof of his innocence, seeing that he himself had called the King's attention to the danger of Liège and had even been commissioned by him to keep the town under his personal supervision. Thus he had been saddled with a definite responsibility, and as he would be obliged to conceal or distort the truth in order to lure the King into the lion's den, he could hardly hope to escape being recognised as a traitor by Louis as soon as the catastrophe occurred. But he merely answered:

“Yes, your Eminence, now I understand everything.”

Leaving the Cardinal's house, which was in the precincts of the cloisters of Notre Dame, he returned to his own quarters in the Hotel des Tournelles, the King's mansion near the Bastille St. Antoine. Louis preferred this small palace to the Palais Royal, where Parliament used to assemble, and used it for his visits to Paris, which were generally short, and for the accommodation of the members of his Court.

Oliver knew that Jean de Beaune was awaiting him and would have news for him from the King and perhaps also from Anne. He hurried across the Pont aux Oiseaux, on which the bird fanciers were offering their noisy chirruping and fluttering goods for sale, and turned right in the direction of the Temple. Oblivious of the crowds, the noise and the traffic, he kept pondering in his mind that in the brief greetings he had at present received by the courier from Anne there breathed the same spirit of assurance and purity which had always characterised her. Might this not be the cause of his uncertainty? Involuntarily he hastened his pace as if the next moment would bring him enlightenment.

Jean de Beaune was already dressed for the return journey. Uncomfortable and short of breath in the shirt of mail which

he wore under his doublet, he informed him that the King would leave Amboise in the course of the next few days in order to await Balue's return in Compiègne. His fat face was puckered with good-natured smiles. The King, he added, was in the best of spirits and the most confident of moods. He could well understand his good spirits, although — and here he made a grimace as though he were drinking sour wine — the King's joy about this extremely questionable expedition was more perplexing. He confessed that, personally, he did not like the idea, and he handed the Chamberlain a note from his royal master.

"His Majesty is in the best of spirits," murmured Oliver as he unsealed the missive. It consisted only of a few lines: — Owing to recent developments the meeting with Burgundy had become of the utmost importance, and could no longer be put off, for, among other things, Louis was convinced that it was only the prospect of help from the Duke that was making Francis of Brittany stiffen his back, and that when he heard of the meeting he would eat humble pie. He even hoped to be able to make his visit with the terms of a separate peace already in his pocket, which would mean a rupture between Brittany and Burgundy. There was no longer any need for Oliver's journey to Liège; not only was there no time for it, but it had ceased to be urgent. His duty was now to accompany Balue to the headquarters of the Burgundian army and keep his ears and eyes open. — The last sentence of the letter, which followed immediately upon the more formal instructions preceding it, was extremely puzzling — "Verily, my friend, man is not so much good or bad through design, will or predisposition, as by the force of passing circumstances; that is why we should never condemn each other thoughtlessly or suppose that we know each other too well."

Oliver closed his eyes in a whirl of conflicting emotions. How was he to interpret this sentence, and how could he allow the King to go headlong to his doom, and even imagine that he took pleasure in so doing? — It was strange too that Louis should himself have destroyed the one feature of the business which might have betrayed Necker's guilt — Liège. Of course the journey there could no longer serve any purpose, not only because there was no time, but also because of the impossibility of stemming the avalanche. But now the definite command not

to go there had freed Oliver of all responsibility. Why should Fate seem pleased to make his game so easy for him? He shook his head.

"Master," said Beaune with his oily laugh, "you look as though the King had set you a conundrum. Though I must confess I too find his eagerness for this visit somewhat puzzling."

"Perhaps he likes setting us conundrums," said Oliver with a smile. "But tell me, sir, what is Anne, my wife, doing?"

The courtier raised his brows discreetly.

"I have not seen very much of her," he replied smoothly; "but I think she is getting on better than the Queen of France does as a rule."

Oliver felt the blood rushing to his head and he turned aside to conceal his agitation from his companion.

"Do you also wish to set me conundrums?" he enquired, with affected cheerfulness.

Jean de Beaune looked at him in astonishment.

"I set you conundrums, dear Master? — Well, at least I can give you the answer if you really do not know it already."

"Of course I know it," Oliver cried, his face distraught. And he laughed awkwardly.

"Well then," observed Beaune somewhat surprised, "I took her myself to the famous little turret-chamber on the very day of your departure, and 'pon my soul she looked a dream, was fragrant as a lily and was in the best of tempers, as was but seemly. — And ever since, the King had been in the best of spirits. — Why are you laughing, Necker?"

Oliver, bending forward and running his fingers through his hair, laughed a short hoarse laugh.

"The King is in the best of spirits!" he repeated. Suddenly he stopped and his face grew hard and set as if frozen by the cold fear that had seized on his heart and brain.

"Sir," he said with grave civility, "greet Queen Anne from me and assure His Majesty of my devotion and my conviction that all will be well."

THE Duke's headquarters were in Péronne. The Cardinal and Oliver, whose credentials were made out in the name of *Le Mauvais*, and who had dyed his hair with a distillation of henna roots in order to escape recognition by Ghentish agents, met

the Constable, St. Pol, in St. Quentin. The Constable was a handsome man of about forty, with the physique of a Hercules. He had already heard all kinds of rumours about the King's new favourite and treated him with unconcealed suspicion and marked repugnance; nor did he change his attitude when Balue pointed out that in the Chamberlain they had won a most valuable ally, but refused to discuss the situation in Oliver's presence. — "In that case the King will not come to Péronne," said Necker laconically. The Cardinal implored the Constable not to jeopardise the whole undertaking for the sake of a whim. "It is not a whim," St. Pol replied rudely. He had nothing against the worshipful Guild of Barbers; all he asked was that they would stick to their shaving. Oliver turned to face him.

"I am quite ready to shave you, my dear Count," he said in bantering tones.

"It strikes me," replied the Constable, turning his back on Oliver, "that you would be more likely to cut my throat." Then addressing Balue, he added, "Why do you allow this small fry to join the great game, your Eminence?"

"By the blood of Christ," blustered Balue, "why, this small fry, as you call him, already had our trump cards in his pocket before I met him! Be reasonable, my dear Count, and be thankful at our good fortune in having him on our side. The Chamberlain has quite as good grounds for hating the King as you or I."

Oliver gave a hideous laugh.

"Leave out your grounds, Monsignor," he exclaimed, "or the shaver of chins may seem superior in morality to the Constable and the Cardinal."

St. Pol sprang to his feet. What the devil did he mean by that? Oliver, looking him straight in the face, replied:

"Merely that you should not condemn the motives of the small fry, sir. Remember that the razor can be an honourable and the Constable's sword a dishonourable weapon according to the motives for which they are used."

St. Pol looked at him in astonishment; then dismissing the subject with a wave of his hand, he proceeded without further ado to discuss the situation in Liège. Von Wildt was in the Ardennes holding himself in readiness with his lanceknights for the Constable's orders to march. As soon as he entered the

diocese, the people of Liège, who were in close touch with him, would rise up, have the Bishop, the ducal lieutenant, and certain obnoxious prelates and officials locked up, drive out the Burgundian garrison, and then push forward with the lanceknights to the frontier of Brabant.

"How many days do you reckon it will take after you have given your orders for the news of these events to reach Péronne, Count?" Oliver enquired.

"About six days."

"Then you will be obliged to send out your order before the King reaches Péronne?"

"Yes," replied St. Pol with some hesitation, glancing at the Cardinal.

Balue gave him a reassuring smile:

"The Chamberlain is fully informed about everything," he said, "and, in view of the important part he has to play, has a perfect right to ask questions. — In my opinion you might give your order as soon as the King leaves Compiègne. You must also reckon on the possibility of his commanding you to join his suite at the last moment."

"I hope not," replied the Constable. "It would ill serve our cause which demands the utmost freedom for watching events and also reliable intelligence about them; nor at the present juncture would my presence be particularly acceptable to the Duke. It would only complicate the situation, as he has ceased to regard me as his friend ever since I took service with the Valois. I should much prefer to keep away from the meeting."

"I will see what can be done," murmured Oliver. "Besides, if the tidings do not reach us in time, through the ordinary channels, we might create an artificial echo of them."

The Constable gazed intently at him.

"Pon my soul," he said, "you seem to be no novice at the game. Please forgive my previous doubts, sir."

"Of course, of course, my dear sir," replied Oliver with an enigmatic smile. "Early doubts are better than late ones."

Once again the partiality with which his brain was working was quite clear to himself. In the course of the conversation he had already, with a secret shudder, discovered in his own questions his indomitable desire to oppose these two, and now

when he saw the whole mechanism of the conspiracy laid bare before him, he, the injured husband, the man who was thirsting for revenge, strove to convince himself that he had no right to return a personal injury with retribution of such vast political import. He struggled to effect a compromise with himself, to avoid confessing to his soul that he was possessed by Louis, coerced and almost absorbed by his demoniacal power. It was necessary, he argued, to protect the King's life by weakening the effect of the outburst in Liège. He would procure at least one witness for Louis' defence — nothing more, certainly nothing more. Things could then take their course.

He made his way to the town, followed by Daniel Bart, and, at a certain inn, sought out Brother Fradin, who, at his request, had secretly followed the legation. He told him to set out at once for Liège and call upon Master Pieter Heuriblocq, the Duke's taxgatherer. He was to tell him that an old friend from Ghent, to whom he had much to be thankful for, had sent to inform him on good authority that the people of Liège would in a few days' time seize and lock up the Bishop, the Duke's lieutenant and the higher officials, including himself. He was not, however, to make any attempt to warn the people thus threatened, for this would only mean that the rebels would break out all the sooner and in any case would not allow the Bishop and the Lieutenant out of the town. He was to entrust himself entirely to the guidance of the monk who was an agent of the Duke, and would conduct him safely out of the zone of danger. All the old friend desired in return was that he would assure the Burgundian government that it was not the King of France but German intrigues that lay behind this last rebellion. Events would prove him right. If, however, he said anything else, the Devil he knew would take him.

"You will then bring him to Péronne," Oliver concluded, "but you will not take him to Crèveœur until I let you know. You will also take care that he does not see me and that he is not in a position to get any information about my position or my activities."

"What if I cannot find the man, or for some reason or other cannot persuade him?" asked the monk.

"Then you will come alone to Péronne."

The legation left the town and, following the course of the

Somme, passed the outposts of Burgundy between the villages of Eclusier-Vaux and Cappy. In Péronne it was received with becoming courtesy. At a solemn audience the Cardinal informed the Duke that the King wished to visit him as a cousin and friend to discuss the chief questions at issue between them and to conclude a lasting peace. The Duke's handsome features remained impassive and impenetrable as a mask. Crèvecœur, his old Chancellor, replying for him in the cold terms of ceremony, expressed his thanks and assurances of an honourable welcome and fitting hospitality. The Duke stood up. His braided black velvet doublet, which left his neck free, and the puffed sleeves of which made his shoulders appear enormously broad, fitted tightly about his narrow hips and sprang out at the bottom like a short farthingale above his athletic thighs. He wore no decorations save the heavy linked chain of the Golden Fleece. His proud impetuous nostrils quivered with anger, as in tones unpleasantly sharp he enquired:

"Does His Most Christian Majesty not want a safe conduct from us for his coming and going?"

The Cardinal made a dignified gesture of protest.

"My exalted master attached great importance to confiding himself to the protection and hospitality of your Highness without guarantees of any sort and will come unaccompanied even by his bodyguard."

What a gifted villain the priest was and what accomplished hypocrites all the folk about him, thought Oliver, as he watched the solemn gravity of their faces. The Duke dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

At nightfall the Count of Crèvecœur presented himself at the quarters of the legation, accompanied only by his lieutenant, Melchior van Busleyden. The Cardinal, who was expecting them, had come to the conclusion — particularly after the experience with St. Pol — that it constituted an error in tactics to introduce the Chamberlain as one initiated into the plot. It was better to maintain the official atmosphere at least by means of one delegate, in order to avoid arousing unnecessary suspicions regarding the seriousness of the undertaking or the reliability of his methods. He therefore decided to speak to the Chancellor alone and briefly into the bargain, limiting the interview to a few remarks about the King's programme and the

best way of meeting his dangerous dialectic. — Oliver was perfectly satisfied, for he knew that matters were now somewhat beyond Balue's resources and that in his secret conversation he would no longer be able to influence events in any unexpected manner. "I willingly grant him the pleasure of expatiating upon the honour that has been done him," he mused, "and possibly I can turn the interval to account."

So he took a seat by Crèveœur's companion and from his accent recognised that he was a native of north Brabant. They were waiting in an ante-chamber, and Oliver, soon realising that his visitor was anxious to get all he could out of him, deliberately made his answers partake of a certain simple and straightforward garrulity. He spoke of the confidence the Cardinal enjoyed at the hands of the King, and of Louis' honest wish to disperse the atmosphere of mistrust and hostility between the two states and secure a permanent peace.

"Is the French army still campaigning in Brittany?" his interlocutor enquired.

"Oh yes," Oliver hastened to reply, "and my royal master will certainly be able to prove to you how unreliable this ally of yours is."

"How, may I ask?"

"If I am not very much mistaken," said Oliver, with the smile of a simpleton, "by showing you the terms of a separate peace which he may already have in his pocket."

"Indeed!" replied Busleyden with studied indifference. "And will Count Dammartin accompany the King?"

"The Grand Master is in command of the army and will hardly be able to get away."

"Of course not, of course not, that is obvious. And the Constable will surely not be able to join the King's suite either?"

"Count St. Pol will come," said Oliver emphatically, "if only to have the opportunity as a former commander of the Burgundian forces to show his honest intentions to both sides as the King's Constable and sometime brother-in-arms of the Duke. He will, so to speak, be a bond of union between them."

His companion gazed intently at him, with raised brows and an expression of faint mockery.

"You are extraordinarily well informed, Chamberlain, and

in an ideal manner which hitherto we have not learnt to expect from a member of the King's intimate personnel. But in that case why did not the Constable, who must certainly be in the neighbourhood, come now with the Cardinal and yourself?"

Necker shook his head dubiously.

"Don't you see, chevalier," he said portentously, "I might give you this answer or I might give you that. I might say he had received no orders to that effect, or that he had no time, or no inclination. But I will tell you the truth, simply and solely for this reason, that by means of the truth — for I always serve my royal master best with the truth and will always serve him *met raedt en daet, met doodt en bloodt*. . . ."

"You are a Fleming," cried the other in astonishment. Oliver smiled.

"Let us say I speak Flemish and that I know Flanders. — But to proceed. At the King's command the Constable is watching developments in Liège . . ."

"Liège. . . ." repeated the official under his breath with ill-concealed excitement.

"Yes," whispered Oliver, "I must tell you, sir, that Liège is the King's greatest anxiety, for it is the source of the Duke's suspicions. We know as well as you do that the volcano is active again. My royal master will prove to you by his presence at such an hour, supported by the evidence of the Constable, that he has had nothing whatever to do with such a movement, and disapproves of it. He wishes once and for all to destroy the suspicion that he fomented disturbances in the Duke's cities! — Do you suppose that he would surrender himself to the power of Burgundy, if at the same time he were kindling a fresh insurrection in Liège? He is coming because he is innocent and because he wishes to give you proof of his innocence. — I know it well, for I have charge of his Flanders policy. I . . ."

The doors were flung open and the Chancellor and Balue entered conversing together with friendly faces.

As they hastened back the envoys met, in St. Quentin, the couriers of the King, who told them that the impatient monarch had left Compiègne and was already awaiting them in Noyon. It was the 6th of October. Balue informed the Constable that

there was every prospect of Louis being in Péronne during the course of the next three days, and that he should therefore send von Wildt his marching orders at once. Oliver was conscious of a feeling of profound agitation which increased the nearer they approached the small town close to the frontier of Picardy. He dreaded meeting the King and yet longed for it. The conflicting emotions in his breast which he found it difficult to understand, influenced as they were by his incomprehensible waverings in plotting and counterplotting, made him fear coming to a definite decision. He was also weary of listening to the voice of conscience which kept reminding him of his heavy load of guilt. Above all he wanted certainty and clarity — measure for measure, guilt for guilt. In his heart of hearts he hoped to find that the King was Anne's lover — the man with a guilty conscience who had written that strange post-script. He hoped for this so that he might separate himself from him without further ado, and disentangling himself from his strange attachment become again the cold detached creature that walked alone.

But he met only the political schemer, the mighty gambler and weaver of plots. Not a word did he hear of Anne, not a word hinting at the thoughts that obsessed them both. He did not even feel Louis' eyes fasten on him with their usual penetrating and piercing gaze. And with a malicious daring that bordered on recklessness he threw himself into the arms of danger.

"Is it in accordance with your Majesty's desire," he asked in one of the rare moments when he happened to be alone with the King, "that his Eminence should have declined a safe conduct from the Duke?"

"Most certainly," replied Louis, with a furtive glance, "that was a most skilful gesture."

Oliver remained depressed and silent. He was wondering what could be the reason for the estrangement between his own spirit and the King's, and was terrified. He felt it was the latter alone who was strange and inscrutable whilst he himself was more transparent than ever to Louis. He also felt that the change in the King's former confidential attitude towards him was not the unconscious result of his excitement over the great political issues in hand, but was deliberate and due to certain

events that had occurred during his absence, or to the monarch's presentiment of his treachery.

They reached St. Quentin on the evening of the 8th of October. Throughout the journey Oliver had tried in vain to have a word alone with the King in order to convince him of the necessity of taking the Constable with him to Péronne. But the Cardinal and the Duke of Bourbon, the King's brother-in-law, whose presence as the only prince of the blood royal in his retinue shed a certain glamour on the King's otherwise meagre suite, did not stir from Louis' side. Provost Tristan, who was riding with Oliver and had been watching him, remarked with his usual sepulchral humour:

"You are really of a most jealous disposition, Master, or am I wrong? Surely you can let them enjoy the King between them. The King's love still remains reserved for you, for you and your —"

"By your own gallows, Provost," Oliver broke in sharply, "I wish to God you would hang your jests on them. They are sorry enough to deserve it, and for all I care you can hang those two chatterboxes on them as well. 'Pon my soul, they are preventing me from putting any check upon the King's follies."

"Oho! Sire le Mauvais," laughed the Provost, "but great folk, as you ought to know, are beheaded, and chattering can cost a man his head, as well as correcting the King. But why can't you let His Majesty play the fool if he wants to?"

"Because we should be held responsible," said Jean de Beaune peevishly, "and I can quite understand your temper, Master Oliver; for, as you know, this expedition does not please me either."

Necker was silent. The King was received at the gate of the town by the Constable and the magistrate. Louis, who disliked ceremonies, only halted for a brief moment and motioned Count St. Pol to his side. Oliver contrived to keep close enough to them to overhear most of their conversation. The King observed that he wished to enter Péronne on the following day.

"I hope that in view of my present relations with the Duke your Majesty will excuse me from joining your suite?" the Constable replied.

Oliver dug his spurs into his horse's ribs and drawing him up sharply made him rear so that the King and the gentlemen

about him turned round. Whereupon, as though by accident, he forced his horse between Louis and St. Pol.

"Forgive me, Sire," he said glancing at the King, and reined in his horse. Louis gave a furtive smile and the Cardinal interposed somewhat hastily:

"If I may be guided by the impressions I received in Péronne, Sire, I would beg leave to suggest that it might be better for the Constable not to accompany you. Master Oliver will perhaps support me in this."

Once again the King turned round, and once again he saw the same expression on Necker's face. The latter murmured humbly:

"It is not for me to contradict his Eminence."

Again the King smiled and, after a moment's reflection added:

"I will think it over, St. Pol, and tell you for certain to-morrow."

With a touch of vexation, the Constable replied:

"If you will excuse me, Sire, there is every reason why I should not take part in your meeting and not one why I should be grateful, therefore, if your Majesty could come to a decision sooner, more especially as I would crave leave to be excused to-night to return to my headquarters."

Louis, raising his voice a little, replied:

"You will have to be patient until the morning, Constable."

The torchbearers, who headed the procession, had now reached the Town Hall, where the King was to stay; and their torches illuminated its portico and part of its vast Gothic façade. The cavalcade halted. The King, without waiting for Oliver's assistance, sprang quickly from the saddle, and with a few brief words dismissed the gentlemen forming the municipal guard of honour, and, pleading fatigue as an excuse, Bourbon, St. Pol and Balue, from the Court circle. Followed by Oliver, the Provost and Jean de Beaune, he accompanied the Chamberlain, appointed by the city, to the State Apartments which had been prepared for him. Here he and his three confidants were served with a cold supper as he wished to retire quickly to bed, and throughout the meal he was unable to control his irritability.

The faces of his companions were also anxious. Tristan

was grave owing to a certain tactfulness and his anticipation of surprises connected with his function, Beaune because he was in a bad temper, and Necker as the result of a sudden feeling of fear regarding himself and his work. Truth to tell, what he feared with a sense of utter helplessness, ay, with feelings of deep love for the King — for every wrinkle in the ugly face, for every thought behind that active and restless brow, with the absorbing and overwhelming conviction of belonging to that strange circle, human fragments of a majestic and demoniac will — what he feared was the avalanche which he had set in motion. And he feared himself too, because he knew that his indomitable love of life would prevent him from being overwhelmed with the rest. — Speak out now, then, he urged himself, speak at once, it is time, it is high time! Humble thyself, for thou hast already desired to humble thyself, inasmuch as thou hast so turned events as to soften the blow for the King. Confess to thyself that thou canst not break loose from this stronger will, and if he possess thy soul why should he not also possess thy wife? Speak! Speak! — And he pressed his lips so tightly together that the blood left them. — Then he saw the King's disconcerting eyes upon him, those piercing omniscient eyes.

"You are very quiet, Oliver," he remarked deliberately. Then looking at the other two, he exclaimed, "To the devil with you all, my friends, what is the matter with you?"

"Péronne," replied Jean de Beaune, answering for all.

"Holy Mary," laughed the King, "you say the word as if it were a death knell."

"Sire!" cried Oliver, staring at him with wild bewildered eyes; but he said no more.

Louis raised his eyebrows and grew serious. Provost Tristan muttered.

"Is the Devil advising the Devil not to write on the wall?"

In a loud voice the King demanded:

"What does le Mauvais advise? For he has some advice for me — either he or his horse."

Oliver pulled himself together.

"The Constable must remain in your suite, Sire," he said firmly.

"Your horse has already told me as much," remarked the King with kindly humour; "but now tell me your reasons."

"There are two reasons," Oliver replied. "The first is that they are probably expecting him in Péronne as an earnest of your Majesty's good will, a sort of emblem of peace, and the Cardinal is therefore wrong. But that is the least important reason." Then after a moment's hesitation he added, "The second and most important reason is that the Constable clearly does not wish to go."

The King looked at him with mingled surprise and suspicion.

"Oliver," he said at last, "there is a discrepancy here. If you know that the Duke is expecting him and would even be glad to see him—even though St. Pol himself does not know it—how could his disinclination to go be the stronger reason?"

"If I may be allowed to say a word, sire," Tristan interposed courteously, "why not? For clearly the Constable is not afraid of being taken for an emblem of peace, but rather of being taken for its opposite, which his sense of his own superiority and importance has led him to regard as a possibility. — I mean that without being over conceited he is aware that in the latter event he might deliver up an excellent hostage."

"Oho! friend Provost," cried Louis with some indignation, "are you too going to take it into your head to croak advice at me? — And what have you to say to your supporter, Oliver?"

"Provost Tristan is no fool," Oliver rejoined gravely, "and I think it well that he too has the courage to call your Majesty's attention, in spite of your Majesty's surprising confidence, to the vicissitudes which are always possible in political intrigues." Then lowering his voice and speaking with mingled embarrassment and assurance, he added, "St. Pol may possibly know other and more solid reasons for his reluctance; in any case one must suspect this to be so, one must reckon with the possibility —"

"And what about Balue?" interposed the King, greatly agitated and again looking sharply at Oliver. "Is he wrong in other things as well?"

Oliver's voice faltered a little.

"The Cardinal is but human, Sire, and obsessed by very definite convictions."

"But what about you, Oliver — did not your news sound somewhat different?"

For a moment there was dead silence. Then Necker answered very quietly:

"Forgive me, Sire — but did not some of your own words sound different? — We are all merely human and liable to err."

Louis sank back for a moment and stared into space, and then a pure and beautiful smile broke over his lips.

"That is true, my friend," he said kindly. "That is, we should not condemn each other thoughtlessly or suppose that we know each other too well. That is a quotation, is it not, Oliver? But it is not meant to sound different from what it does sound, for up to the present, I, for my part, am not aware of having erred."

Once more he turned to look at the Master.

"Or of having sinned either, Oliver — for sin is sometimes close akin to error. — I have no more to say, my friend. — But you have something more to say."

Necker clasped his fingers nervously. He was fighting a hard fight. Suddenly he exclaimed loud and quick:

"Don't go to Péronne to-morrow, Sire. Wait another week! Wait another five days!"

The King looked up astonished.

"Why, Oliver? What purpose would it serve?"

Provost Tristan and Jean de Beaune also listened intently.

"I am right, am I not," cried the Treasurer, "in thinking that you, too, Necker, augur no good from this enterprise?"

"I do not trust the people of Liége," said Oliver in great agitation, "and on my own responsibility I have sent a messenger there. Wait, Sire, until he returns!"

The King shook his head.

"That is impossible, Oliver. The King of France cannot halt three miles from his destination for the sake of cock-and-bull rumours. And least of all can I allow myself to appear ridiculous in the eyes of the Duke and expose my Achilles heel to him in such doltish fashion. I don't wish to arouse his suspicions and so ruin everything. And above all I must hold parley with him before the Duke of Brittany can get into communication with him again."

He rose.

"No, Oliver. Even though I may rejoice at your concern on my behalf, and over yours too, my good friends, and if I now once and for all gladly free you, Oliver, and you too, Tristan and Jean, of all responsibility for the meeting, it is nevertheless too important and too pressing for me to postpone it for a single hour. — Come, Oliver."

"And what if they are luring you into a trap, Sire?" Jean de Beaune enquired bluntly.

The King, who was already at the door, turned on his heel. Proudly he replied:

"Then I pity those who laid the trap, and also Provost Tristan for the heavy work that awaits him. Now come, Oliver. — How pale you are!"

Necker, forcing himself to smile, followed his master into the bedroom and helped him to unrobe with the unsteady movements of a man who is not thinking of what he is doing.

"How pale you are, Oliver," Louis repeated. "Were you offended because for a moment I took it for granted that you remained silent or spoke out according to whether you thought I was or was not guilty towards you?"

"Why should that offend me?" Oliver murmured, his eyes on the floor, "and why did you take it for granted even for a moment, Sire?"

"Oliver," cried the King in alarm, "what on earth do you mean by that?"

Necker raised his eyes.

"Merely that we are but human and as human beings must suffer," he muttered, "and that I am still constrained to doubt whether your Majesty is not overlooking the petty sufferings of man and setting too much stress on the petty failings."

Louis gazed at him for some moments and his eyes grew hard.

"If you dare to doubt, my friend, then your doubts are justified," he said coldly. "And now, do you repent of your anxiety about my sinful person?"

Oliver seized his hand and bowed over it.

"No, Sire, for I cannot help loving you," he said, under his breath. Then drawing himself up he exclaimed imploringly:

"Wait another week. I expect trouble!"

"No," replied the King resolutely. "You know it is im-

possible. But in order to allay your fears and forestall undesirable developments in Liége, the Constable, who will have to overcome his objections and come with us to Péronne, shall send word to von Wildt, bidding him quietly to bide his time until my return to France and impose the necessary restrictions upon the people of the city as well. — Have you any further objections, Oliver?”

With some hesitation Necker replied “No.” Then stretching himself on his couch he soon heard the King’s rapid and irregular snoring. He pondered over Louis’ untroubled, almost blind confidence, and his deep faith in him which was not shaken by self-doubts. The stillness of the night facilitated clarity and calmness of thought. He examined himself in the endeavour to discover why he had just said “No!” when he was on the point of confessing all and revealing the whole conspiracy. — Was it his thirst for revenge that was still alive? — He closed his eyes as though he would hear the answer better thus. No, it was something very different! His heart beat fast: it was his fear lest he should lose the King. That was the real reason. To confess everything would have destroyed Louis’ faith in him, not only Louis’ faith but the very meaning of his life, perhaps life itself; for Louis would have sent him away or disposed of him in his own manner. — And as for an impersonal and, as it were, official revelation of the conspiracy — it was too late for that. The King would pay no heed to statements made without proof, and Oliver had no proof against Balue’s ingenious machinations except himself. There was, therefore, no alternative but to allow the King to go down into the lion’s den and then cut his way out again as best he could. — Oliver smiled as he thought how much his spirit, possessed by the King, had already accomplished towards this end. He was conquered. He felt himself absorbed in the other, with no personality of his own, and yet he knew that he was once again level-headed and able to tread his path with greater certainty of his goal than he had ever been before. To save him, to force him to new and stronger bonds of love, to be indispensable to him, with a fresh knowledge of the vast potentialities of such a position, to be his hand, his brain, his conscience — in very truth, he said to himself with an inaudible chuckle, if the King possesses me then I can well afford to renounce myself. He raised his head. He could no

longer hear Louis' breathing and felt that the King's eyes were open and that he was about to speak.

"Oliver," said the King softly, "I shall not be ungrateful to you for having loved me in spite of all."

Necker laughed to himself and pretended to be asleep.

Chapter 7

THE FALSE ST. DENIS

AS the bells were ringing for matins on the following morning, the King set forth once more. The Constable, who seemed to have been guided by the sharper wits of Balue, obeyed the royal command to join the suite without any protestation or signs of reluctance. He also despatched a member of his staff to the Ardennes with a message for the freelance, fully aware that at this late hour it would be in vain, and told the envoy with a smile to communicate the King's command to the silent beauty of the oaks and beeches.

It was the 9th of October and a Sunday—the day of St. Denis of Paris who had carried his head, after it had been cut off, in his own hands to the spot where he wished to be buried—at least so good Jacobus de Voragine tells us.

“He was indeed a holy man and a distinguished prelate, like yourself, your Eminence,” Louis remarked with a smile, as, in a peculiar mood, he reminded the Cardinal of the legend. “But he wrote his *Speculum Sanctorum* far away from the sphere of politics. — You are more interested in the *Theatrum Mundi*, are you not?”

Balue nodded somewhat dubiously. He was not overfond of his master's subtle ironies, least of all on that particular day.

A cold wind was driving fragments of cloud over the broad cultivated lands of Picardy. Now and again it rained. The bells were ringing in the villages as they passed and, when they were situated close together, the sound of the chimes mingled stirringly together in the wind. Occasionally they sounded as if they were ringing the tocsin. The King, who had not spoken much, suddenly exclaimed, as if to himself:

“I don't like this day, or its saint either.”

Then turning once more to the Cardinal, he observed with a strained smile:

“I wonder whether I should be canonised, your Eminence,

if with my head still on my shoulders I were now going to my grave."

"Oh, Sire, what a terrible joke!" murmured Balue, glancing at the Constable. Oliver, who was close behind them, bowed his head.

At midday they reached the outskirts of Péronne. In the fields east of the village of Cappy, the Duke was awaiting them with great pomp and ceremony, and the Burgundian troops spread over the whole of the broad plain as far as the walls of the city.

Charles of Burgundy, bare-headed, fair as the god of war in his armour of wondrous Milan workmanship, rode forward alone to meet the King. Louis' retinue also remained behind. The two greeted each other — the slim Valois with a bewitching smile on his lips, and the giant Charles with a face cold and hard as his steel harness. But the King's smile faded away and the gracious words froze on his lips, when his sharp eyes, glancing over the shoulders of the Duke, caught sight of the group of armed nobles, who were slowly advancing, helmet in hand. The Duke, who was watching him, twisting his mouth into a grimace of mockery, said:

"These gentlemen, your Majesty, who are to form your escort of honour, great and noble gentlemen, wish to be recalled to your Majesty's memory."

The Duke's infernal arrangements were quickly and unmistakably apparent. There was Philip of Savoy, the King's brother-in-law and brother of the Queen, who for two years had languished in the dungeons of the Castle of Loches, because he had led the opposition in Savoy to Louis' unscrupulous support of Milan's policy of annexation. There was also Seigneur du Lau, who two years previously had been the King's Grand Chamberlain, Grand Cup Bearer and Seneschal, but in a sudden access of fury on Louis' part had, as it were in the space of a night, been dashed from his pinnacle as one of the King's favourites, and cast into the prison cells of the Castle of Sully-sur-Loire. A few months later he had been handed over to Provost Tristan in the Castle of Usson in Auvergne to be brutally done to death, but succeeded in miraculously making good his escape, before the hour fixed for the execution, leaving in the hands of the disappointed executioner only the head of René

des Nobles, the unfortunate officer of the guard. There, too, was Poncet de Rivière, sometime captain of the King, and afterwards Governor of that same city of Usson which had assisted the Grand Chamberlain in his flight, who had managed betimes to escape into safety and whom Louis knew to be serving with the Burgundian army and fomenting hatred against him. There was also Pierre d'Urfé, the King's enemy of old, the intriguing and dangerous adviser of Charles of France, his rebellious brother. Followed, too, the Grand Bastard, Anthony of Burgundy, Marshal of the Duke's army, to whom Louis had promised the town of Epinal, but had taken it away again because he thought it would serve a more useful purpose as a present for the Duke of Lorraine. Last of all came more princes of the royal house of his enemy of Savoy, and certain Burgundian and German nobles whom the King, for one reason or another, had ill used, persecuted or offended. One and all breathing vengeance and hatred, they came forward as in the agonising vision of a nightmare — a procession marshalled by a guilty conscience.

In solemn silence the great men bowed before the King, who with inscrutable countenance and lips compressed looked each one in the eyes, whereupon they formed up in his rear while Louis' small escort greeted the Duke and took up a similar position behind him. When St. Pol bowed before Charles of Burgundy, the latter gave him the ghost of a smile and said sharp and low:

“Fancy seeing you, brother!”

But for that he was silent, and, out of all the King's suite, deigned to thank only Bourbon, hardly noticing the others, including the Cardinal, and vouchsafing only a glance for the last — Oliver.

The procession then began to move forward, and rode slowly between the two walls of steel, consisting of motionless guards, towards the town.

As the few habitable rooms of the Castle of Péronne were serving as a residence for the Duke, the King was allotted the stately mansion of the chief taxgatherer as his quarters. But when Oliver informed his master that the gentlemen composing the somewhat sinister guard of honour were quartered in the same building or in adjoining houses, together with their troops,

Louis, without removing a garment or tasting a morsel of food, and still laconic and preoccupied, as he had been ever since the reception, sent his Chamberlain to the Duke with the request that he might be allowed to stay in the castle, even if the rooms available for him were scarcely suitable.

To Oliver's astonishment, the Count of Crèvecœur, to whom he made the request, returned with the reply that the Duke wished to speak to him personally. He found Charles of Burgundy writing at an immense table in the recess of a bare room.

"Is the King afraid?" the Duke demanded, without further preliminaries, raising his head with a furtive smile.

"I cannot imagine, your Highness," replied Oliver emphatically, "what my exalted master could possibly have to fear under your protection. But he desires to be under the same roof as yourself, to facilitate the business for which he is here, and to join in friendly converse. His Majesty has learnt by experience that nothing so much tends to create errors and misunderstandings as distance. And to remove this obstacle was the motive of his visit."

"You have not been very long in the service of the King, have you?" Burgundy enquired suddenly after a pause. Oliver looked at him and hesitated for a moment before replying. Then he said truculently:

"Long enough, your Highness, to know why the choice of the escort of honour was not quite a happy one. . . ."

"Chamberlain," interrupted the Duke with a frown, "it was I who made the choice and I think it good. It is not my fault if the King should have reason to fear these gentlemen. Maybe the King has even more to fear!"

"Your Highness," said Oliver slowly, looking him full in the face, "maybe the King knows this, maybe the King knew it before he came here, maybe he wishes to prove to you by his presence that he has nothing to fear. His Majesty is asking for quarters in the castle in order that the proximity of those gentlemen and their unfriendly thoughts may not introduce fresh discord into the air or poison it. If he really feared them he would avoid your presence too, your Highness, who made this strange choice."

The Duke listened with rapt attention, and gave Crève-

cœur, the Chancellor, who was standing silently by his chair, the order immediately to make ready, as well as might be, a few rooms for the King and his suite in the west wing of the castle. Oliver, who considered he had discharged his mission, begged leave to retire.

"One word more, Chamberlain," said the Duke, as the Chancellor left the room. Oliver waited in suspense, and thanked the lucky chance that had made it possible for him, without being suspected, to take these preliminary measures for the saving of the King. He knew only too well how to hit them on the raw. The Duke leant back in his chair.

"One word more," he repeated. "Does Cardinal Balue, whose joint delegate you were, share your views about the King's supposed knowledge?"

Ah, the young bull! thought Oliver, inwardly delighted. How clever it is!

"Begging your pardon, your Highness," he rejoined, shrugging his shoulders as if he were at the end of his resources, "that is a question I cannot answer. All I can say is that my exalted master has no reason for trusting his Eminence less than he trusts myself."

He hesitated a moment and then, skilfully changing his tone, continued:

"And it is my duty to warn you, your Highness, that you will be well advised not to count upon any feeling of fear or guilt on his Majesty's part, or on scenic effects such as that represented by the escort of honour, or on more violent measures, which could only succeed if they were morally justified, and if they were directed against one who was not well informed. Remember only my master's good will and that he is here in order to remove all cause for misunderstanding and secure a lasting peace. Forgive my frank speaking, your Highness."

The Duke folded his arms and with his nostrils dilated tapped impatiently with his fingers on the steel mesh of his sleeve armour.

"But can you answer me this question, Chamberlain," he said sharply, "has your warning been given me as part of your official mission here?"

"Certainly," replied Oliver, bowing, as the Duke rose to dismiss him. As he stepped backwards towards the door, still

under the searching scrutiny of the Duke, the latter exclaimed hastily:

"I am told, *Sieur le Mauvais*, that you are well acquainted with our language."

"Yes, your Highness, I speak it and I know Flanders," Oliver replied with a smile, speaking Flemish with a marked French accent.

"Do you also know Liège?" demanded the Duke suddenly.

"Certainly I know Liège," answered Necker courteously and with a suggestion of mockery, "although it is many years since I was there. But if your Highness imagines I am one of the *agents provocateurs* of the King in Flanders, if you still harbour such unhallowed suspicions, noble sir, and really believe that the King foments insurrection in your cities, we shall have the pleasure of giving you proof to the contrary."

"So much the better," replied the Duke curtly, and turned on his heel.

THE King's spirits rose as the result of the information with which Oliver returned, and which he couched in terms more friendly than truthful. The Master felt that Louis, depressed as he was and whose nature only lost its exceptional self-confidence at times when he was forcibly withheld from his goal or when that goal was out of sight and his person faced with sudden danger, was not in a fit state to listen to facts. He also knew that the mere suspicion of danger was enough to make the King adopt, as if by chance, suitable measures to ward it off; and he already noticed a strange light in his eyes when they looked at Balue and the Constable. He therefore confined himself to saying that what was most necessary for the moment was to give outward and visible signs of his belief in his own superiority of mind and rank.

The removal to the castle took place on the same day. While the workmen were still busy in the rooms that had been selected in the west wing — close to the castle tower — putting hangings with all possible speed on the damp walls, replacing missing window panes and moving furniture, the King arrived with his suite and personally decided the allotment of the rooms. He selected the last room, from which all the others opened, for Oliver and himself, making sure that it contained

no second means of access; and, between the apartments of the Cardinal and the Constable, he installed Jean de Beaune and Tristan in a common chamber. Necker had more than once noticed that ever since their departure from St. Quentin, Balue had tried to speak to him unobserved, and that his anxiety had become particularly acute since he had returned from his audience with the Duke. He had, however, taken no pains to give him an opportunity — nay, he had even deliberately avoided doing so, and had kept himself constantly by the King's side, so that the obvious discomfort of the prelate had increased by leaps and bounds. He had not heeded his timid offer to join him on his mission to the Duke for the purpose of arranging the matter of the King's quarters, and had purposely seen to it that it would be impossible for him to follow him against his will. But as the King, in conversation with his brother-in-law Bourbon, entered a little gallery leading to an inner court, Balue drew Oliver back into the room.

"In the Devil's name, Master," he whispered in agitated tones, "what is he thinking about?" And, pointing to the gallery along which the King had just gone, he added: "Does he suspect anything? Does he know anything?"

Oliver shrugged his shoulders slowly, but did not reply.

"Why won't you open your mouth now?" hissed the Cardinal with ill-suppressed fury. "Why weren't you able to arrange for the Constable to remain out of the game? Why did you not take me to the Duke with you? It is enough to make one suspect you!"

"Now, now, your Eminence," said Oliver coldly, "I am certainly constantly about the King, by his side and behind him, but I am not actually inside him. How am I to know what he thinks of it all, why he made St. Pol come with him, why he sent only me to the Duke, and why he does not seem to wish to have me out of his sight? But this much I do know, Monsignor, that it would be enough to make you suspect even yourself if you were any less surprised or alarmed than I, or, for the matter of that, the King, was over the colossal stupidity of that escort."

"But I knew nothing about it!" Balue assured him.

"Well, then, your Eminence," scoffed Necker, "the conspiracy, what with surprises all round, seems magically to have

undermined all attempts at methodical co-operation and support. Without any warning the Duke produces a living register of crimes, while you are going to conjure an unexpected revolution into being. God knows what the King, as a third magician and possibly the best qualified of the lot, is capable of unexpectedly conjuring up. But, seriously, your Eminence, you can see for yourself that he is busy plotting and planning. You must also be aware that his looks are not over friendly to yourself. Be on your guard, Monsignor, avoid any private conversations with the Burgundian gentlemen, and even with St. Pol, or with me. Be careful!"

Balue grew a trifle paler as the voices and footsteps of Louis and Bourbon approached.

"Did the Duke mention me?" he whispered hurriedly. Oliver shook his head and stepped into the gallery again, while Balue on tip-toe hastened back to his room.

"Were you talking to anybody?" the King demanded looking round suspiciously.

"To his Eminence," Necker replied, with a covert glance at Bourbon.

"Brother," said Louis, in friendly tones, "it is surely time that we should be dressing for the banquet."

The Duke bowed and retired. The King leant against the stone parapet of the gallery and gazed at the tower of the castle, whose massive and sinister pile was veiled in the evening mist.

"What did he want?" he asked shortly.

"He wanted to know what you were thinking, Sire," said Oliver, with a smile.

The King turned to face him.

"What I think about him?"

"About him and our present predicament."

"Did he connect himself with it?"

"Yes," replied Oliver emphatically.

The King looked darkly at the red tiles on the floor.

"And what did you say to him?" he asked after a while.

"That I could hardly be expected to know the thoughts of my ruler."

Louis stared at him.

"But you do know, then, Oliver?"

Necker was silent and lowered his eyes. Louis stepped towards him and asked in low tones:

"Do you think his strange enquiry seemed proof of a clear conscience?"

"No, Sire."

"Do you harbour the terrible suspicions against him that I do, my friend?"

Oliver raised his head and searched the King's face, and thought he could already see it illuminated by the resolve to enter upon the struggle. He took the fatal step.

"My suspicions are even more terrible," he said earnestly, and then added quickly, "but only since this morning, for yesterday I had only the same vague fears and apprehensions which Jean de Beaune and Provost Tristan felt no less than I did. But we are perhaps unjust," he continued, softening as he saw Louis' expression change. "Allow me to prosecute my investigations carefully, Sire. Leave me to my work, and do you keep your eye on Balue and St. Pol, and let them feel that you are watching them. And, above all, be confident in your attitude towards the Duke, and pretend to a certain omniscience in his presence, so that he may, without further ado, abandon any sinister designs he may have. And don't be over anxious, Sire. We shall not grope in the dark for long." Lowering his voice, he pointed to the wing of the castle occupied by the Duke. "I have a very sharp pair of ears listening for us over there," he said.

The King smiled and once more delight in the game of politics suffused his pinched and crafty features. Once more he seemed to have his goal before his eyes. Oliver was pleased with him, and, following him into his room, helped him to dress. He was delighted to see the unusual care with which Louis selected his clothes — a dark sable-trimmed court doublet, and over it a short, loose, broad-sleeved cloak of similar material and fur, a gold-embroidered cap trimmed with sable, and a heavy girdle set with precious stones of priceless worth.

When the Burgundian Grand Chamberlain came to fetch the King in solemn ceremony and escorted him to the great banquetting hall, when Toison d'Or, the ducal herald and master of the ceremonies, announced in stentorian tones on the threshold of the hall, "His Majesty the King!" and the splendid assembly, suddenly grown dumb, sprang to their feet, Louis

bore his ungainly head with so much dignity and his slight body with such gravity and charm that the movements of his royal person seemed to be controlled like a coronation robe. And Oliver, who walked behind him, was filled with an unusual pride, which was at once pleasant and bewildering as a sweet narcotic, especially when Charles of Burgundy, handsome and proud as a Greek god in his court dress of velvet and ermine, bowed low in obvious reverence before his lord.

The King and the Duke were seated under a canopy, made of red brocade, on which the three crowned lilies of Valois and the lions of Brabant were magnificently embroidered in gold. The Duke's chair was a little lower than the King's.

Next to Louis sat Philip of Savoy, the Chancellor Crève-cœur, the Grand Bastard and the other gentlemen of the guard of honour, in order of rank, whilst next to the Duke was the Cardinal, Bourbon, the Constable, Jean de Beaune, Provost Tristan, and the dignitaries of the Burgundian Court. The Duke had had the brutality to arrange that the Provost Marshal should sit opposite du Lau, whom he had once put to the torture. L'Hermite greeted him with his subtle smile.

Oliver stood behind the King and served him, tasting each dish before handing it to him, and a Burgundian dapifer waited on the Duke in similar fashion. The office of cup-bearer for both princes was filled by that same Melchior van Busleyden, who was apparently in high favour with Charles of Burgundy, and who four days previously had accompanied the Chancellor to Balue's quarters and had received certain remarkable information from Oliver. They now stood silently side by side and pretended not to recognise each other.

Above the hall, the mouldering ceiling and walls of which had been hastily covered with silken hangings, the assembled spirits of evil hovered like loathsome phantoms, and the courtly gestures of the company were as poor a covering for the destructive will that lurked in the background as were the hangings on the walls. Through the sullen and gloomy whispering round the table, the King's voice could be heard now and again clear and unconcerned. In due course the Duke rose to propose a toast. Even if his heart had been innocent of all sinister purpose, he was yet a bad speaker, but his guilty conscience oppressed him and made his speech more halting than ever. He snapped out

rough, short sentences, as if he were presenting his welcome on the point of the sword. Then his voice grew hoarse with excitement, and his words poured out like a volcano as he threw out his breast in truculent defiance.

"We, too, wish for peace, Sire, but peace for us cannot be divorced from justice, honour and respect of treaties. We would have done with ambiguity, Sire, and with trickery, even though nowadays this is held to be the height of political wisdom. Nay, we would have even more, Sire; we would have a retrospective peace which, as far as may be, will make good past wrongs, so that the future may be guided by justice and goodwill. We would not even shrink from allowing the witnesses of injustice to come forth and speak, under the protection of our power. We would draw the guilty conscience from its hiding place and strip it bare by our might. We, who are responsible for the welfare of our realm, will not hesitate to exploit the advantage God has given us for the accomplishment of our purpose, and should a stubborn will oppose us and stand in the way of our goal, we will hold the laws of hospitality and of reverence of less account than the overweening love we bear our people. We make no petty demands, Sire, but will ourselves determine the terms of a just and honourable peace, and fix its conditions unequivocally as seems right in our own judgment, for we have the strength and the right thereto. . . ."

The Duke broke off suddenly as if he had said too much, and drank the King's health awkwardly, his face aflame as if he were now ashamed to pronounce the conventional words of welcome expected from him as host. Dead silence reigned in the hall. Mechanically, and with a freezing smile, Louis raised his goblet, drank a mouthful, put it down and looked beyond it at the Cardinal. His expression was terrible.

"Let us not forget the *Spiritus rector*," he said, in confident and friendly tones. "To your health, your Eminence!"

Balue thanked him, his broad face deadly white between his red biretta and cassock. The Duke's uncontrolled speech had terrified him less than Louis' calm mockery. It was a matter of indifference to him if the angry Burgundian threw aside the mask a few hours sooner than seemed necessary. What would two days of impotent rage have mattered, provided it was impossible for the King to escape his doom? But he was turning

over in his mind the words of warning Oliver had given him late that afternoon — what did the Valois know? What was he planning? And if he knew nothing and were planning nothing, how could he show such equanimity? What if he should succeed in discovering the secret of the whole plot and all its ramifications? What if he parried the blow and escaped unscathed? Balue shuddered at the idea and the thought of the fate which lurked behind it for him. He looked towards Oliver with an expression at once suspicious and beseeching, but quickly lowered his eyes again, bewildered and agitated by the face which seemed to have been gazing at him for some time — the Devil was the only person in that vast assembly who was smiling.

It was now the King's turn. He spoke clearly, calmly and sonorously, with arms stretched carelessly out before him as he sat looking straight in front of him. With the utmost courtesy he thanked the Duke for his welcome, and for his friendly speech. At this all heads were raised in surprise, but he appeared not to notice it. In the smooth flow of his address not even irony could be detected, and least of all aught that could provoke blame, defence, or attack. He had the ineffable daring to reply to a speech which had never been made, and not to reveal by a single intonation that he had either heard or understood the fatal threats the Duke had uttered, as if he regarded their utterance as quite inconceivable. Burgundy bit his lips, and the Court dignitaries sat stiffly in their seats. Louis of Valois had the audacity to conjure the Duke's speech, the very words he had spoken, the subject of an address which had lasted and been listened to for ten long minutes, into its direct opposite to their very faces. Louis of Valois replied as a gracious sovereign might reply to the loyal greetings of his vassal. He expressed his pleasure at the good work of his ministers who had arranged this meeting so rich in blessings. It was well for the King to have lively recollections of friendly and intimate relations with his princes, and a day spent together accomplished more for the welfare of nations than a whole year wasted in an incessant exchange of notes; personal ties were better than the best trained troops. With a courteous gesture, Louis turned to face the Duke.

"If we begin our discussion early to-morrow, cousin," he said, "by the evening we shall already be able to look back

upon a goodly stretch of road which we shall have traversed together in the direction of our goal. By that time, too, you will have recognised many an error and rid yourself of many a prejudice, which, in view of your glorious youth and knightly prowess, are easily understood and forgiven. Your King is glad to forget much which you, cousin, ought to be no less slow or less glad to consign to oblivion, for your King would fain set aside even his sovereignty in his desire to be your comrade in securing a lasting peace. I drink to our good comradeship, and the union of our spirits in human fellowship, my lord duke."

With a shrewd smile he raised his goblet. But the Duke, his face quivering with rage, his fists clenched, sat mute and did not stir. Once again the King, to suit his purpose, seemed to distort the truth. With a cheerful countenance he drank the health of a kindly host, and, with a look of gratitude and a bow of satisfaction, laid the goblet down on the table.

Then, leaning back in his chair, he glanced carelessly around the silent company, who were gazing at him, some with horror, some in astonishment, some in bewilderment, while others involuntarily bowed their heads, according as each was stirred by memory, feelings, or desire. His neighbour of Savoy was one of those whose faces wore an expression of complete amazement; du Lau among those who bowed their heads. The Constable was one of the few who controlled their feelings, while Balue and one or two others pulled wry faces. But there were two, the radiant joy of whose countenances illumined the gloomy shadows of the hall — the fat, red cheeks of Jean de Beaune, whose face and eyes quivered with secret jubilation, and Tristan's puny, wizened oval, as he smiled contentedly and blinked his scoffing eyes. Yet a third head loomed to the King's right, almost grazing his shoulder, and pierced him with its gaze. As Oliver handed him a slice of roast swan on a golden plate, the King caught sight of his profile and gathered from his lowered lids and the barely perceptible twitching of his mouth so much praise, admiration and devotion that he gave a low laugh. Then suddenly he laughed louder, and Jean de Beaune, no longer able to control his rising mirth, gave a loud guffaw.

"How jolly you all are, my good Burgundians," cried the King, "and how merry and talkative the presence of your merry and talkative monarch of France makes you!"

They all stared uncomfortably round the festal board, but Louis' eloquence did not abate.

"And the same applies to you, my good comrades of Savoy. I thank you, and shall not be forgetful. Of your devotion, my beloved subjects of France, I need make no mention."

He then turned to his former Grand Chamberlain, and the words issued from a mouth which betrayed its love of cruelty.

"Methinks, Seigneur du Lau, that it is a long time since you saw your King in so gracious a mood. How long is it, friend Provost?"

Provost Tristan smiled, thought for a moment, stroking his chin the while, and then, his soft, melodious voice full of affability, replied:

"It is two years almost to a day, Sire, since I last had the pleasure of conversing with this gentleman in the King's name, and since I had the official honour of convincing him of your Majesty's interests."

The Provost bowed to his victim with the same courtly expression with which, two years previously, he had brought his first examination of him to a close by the threat of torture, and had ordered his men to heat the irons which were then thrust beneath the prisoner's thumb-nails. Du Lau clenched his teeth at the terrible memory, and smothered a groan of rage.

"Two years already!" The King seemed astonished. Then thoughtfully he turned to his neighbour. "Two years can be quite a long time, or quite a short one, can it not, my good brother of Savoy?"

Philip's face grew very red.

"It is long enough, Sire," he returned, looking straight into the King's eyes, "for one to lose all respect for human life."

The Constable, who was sitting opposite him, said suddenly:

"Or so short a time, my lord; it might, strangely enough, seem too much of a sameness to be noticed."

Louis looked from one to the other and said imperturbably:

"It all depends whether it is applied to one's own life or to another's."

"To one's own," said St. Pol.

"To another's," said Savoy.

"To both," cried the Duke incisively, "to every life."

"There speaks the warrior," said Louis, as if lost in thought. "But what says the man of God?"

He cast a piercing glance at the Cardinal. Balue forced himself to laugh.

"If I were to lose my respect for the life God gave us," he said gently, "then I should no longer be a man of God."

"That is perfectly true," scoffed the King, still full of a devilish lust to torment. "But you are also very much a man of the world. Does this cause no conflict in your conscience?"

Balue shook his head gloomily, and replied with some hesitation:

"I beg your pardon, Sire, but in my case the first premises of the whole argument are lacking. I cannot complain as to the negative effect of any period of time."

"Quite so," said Louis, with a hideous laugh. "Up to the present, as far as your own experience goes, at least, you have no need to share the pessimism of these three gentlemen. But all I wanted to know was how you, the prelate and politician, stood, as a thinking man, towards such an attitude of mind. You have already given me your answer as a cleric. I should now like to have the reply of the man of the world, so to speak."

Balue gave a little shrug of his shoulders, and the crafty look came into his eyes again, as he answered:

"Allow me once again, your Majesty, to draw upon the inexhaustible treasures of theological lore. I will reply in the words of St. Augustine, who in his confessions said: 'Time is not empty and doth not pass without effect upon our lives. Strange things doth it work in our souls.' I will also reply in the words of St. Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians: 'For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?' while the Vulgate says to all this: '*Omnis homo mendax*.' But this is not to be interpreted in the light of morality, but of human frailty. I would therefore say, Sire, that I readily believe in the psychical effect of time upon our good friends of Burgundy, and Savoy, and upon St. Pol, and upon mankind in general, without offering any explanation or passing judgment upon it, and without identifying myself either with the one or the other. I readily believe it may have every possible effect upon the soul, but I, as a man, cannot see what is within man." He paused for a moment and then added with

great emphasis: "The feeble power of man does not enable him to see what is in other men, nor to reckon with it or forestall it, Sire."

The King seemed in no hurry to reply, but rested his chin thoughtfully on his hands. In the guise of philosophical and psychological speculation, Balue had certainly defended himself most skilfully. Even Oliver was filled with admiration for the shrewdness of the prelate, who boldly and at a moment's notice had not only parried a thrust at his guilt, but in his dishonesty had strangely enough appealed to the same human limitation which but a short time ago had wrought its tragic effect upon the King and Oliver and stood between them — the fact that they did not know each other. The Cardinal, too, had harped upon the theme of man's liability to err, but he had done so deliberately with the object of safeguarding himself in respect of two possible contingencies — if the expected catastrophe took place, it would be in keeping with the plan and make the surprise from Liège appear inevitable, and in the event of the unexpected happening and Louis making good his escape, Balue, though he might be regarded as an unsuccessful politician, could not be arraigned before his indignant sovereign as a traitor. There was also a third possibility with which this fatal hour seemed to threaten him and the other conspirators — the possibility that the King knew more, that he knew all, and that, mastering the situation, he would be pitiless and bent on cruelty, just as his last words had been — in which case it might be no bad means of extracting his secret thoughts from him and attaining certainty. Oliver waited in suspense for the King's reply. He was afraid it might betray to the Cardinal that his suspicions were still unconfirmed and that his behaviour had been dictated only by shrewd conjecture. Quickly making up his mind, therefore, he leant forward and, brushing the King's arm as he stooped to remove a dish from the table, he whispered in his left ear:

"The Pharisee. . . ."

Then, taking a silver basket containing pastries from the table, he whispered this time in the King's right ear: "*Mendax. . . .*"

The King gave a little smile, as though the result of his meditations had reminded him of his strange conversation,

which, for some unaccountable reason, had put him in good spirits and discomfited the others. Raising his voice a little, and betraying somewhat too obviously that he intended to be offensive, he said:

"Excellently argued, your Eminence. You are certainly the best dialectician among us, though your theological education is surely hardly responsible for that. Very good, very good! For if a brick were to fall on my head, how could you, your Eminence, know, how could you even suspect, that the owner of the house in front of which it occurred had deliberately contrived the accident with intent to kill, and to this end had loosened the brick and let it fall? This is but a small example of the ignorance of mankind. You understand me, Monsignor? If you chanced to be walking with me, and even led me beneath the house, desirous to gain information about the owner and his hostility to me, how could you, in your innocence, see into his heart, your Eminence, and unveil his nefarious plot? Does not my simple allegory afford a perfect example of your argument, without the help of either the Bible or quotations from the Fathers?"

Balue nodded dubiously and said "Yes."

"Very well," continued the King eagerly, "and now it may perhaps interest you and the other gentlemen to hear my attitude towards the problem." He raised his voice and glanced from one to the other. "I confess, my lords, that I am a believer in the philosophy of mistrust. Allow me to abide by my allegory. From the very beginning I should not only regard the owner of that house as capable of every possible crime, but would also always reckon with the possibility that my companion — supposing he knew the other — was a partner in his nefarious schemes. I therefore either would insist on walking on the other side of the road, or would so study the situation with a view to discovering the safest way of moving in the zone of danger, that the brick either would fall on my companion or would drop harmlessly to the ground, according to whether I was or was not convinced of his complicity. All I mean, your Eminence, is this: I may be just as little able as you are to see into men's hearts, or possibly I am better able; but in any case, as a man of the world, I reckon with the evil in men. And as I have only one life to lose, my lords, and am accustomed to set great

store upon it, I must beg to disagree with my brave Constable and the head of the Burgundian forces, and side with my beloved brother-in-law of Savoy; though in this I am saying nothing new. I have no respect for the lives of other people, my lords, and in confessing this I am not influenced by considerations of the moment. I respect only my own life, my cousin of Burgundy, and would be loth to risk it as you do!"

The last sentence was rapped out incisively and rang ominously through the lofty hall. Balue's face twitched as though he had been hit. The Duke bowed his head, unable to meet Louis' glance. Once again the whole hall was stiff with horror and astonishment.

But the King did not stop. He dragged their fettered souls backwards and forwards, he tortured them with insinuations, his laughter and his spiteful jokes, discussing their present, their past and their future, which he seemed to survey and to shape with saturnine levity. Then suddenly, with a magic wave of the hand, he banished the phantoms inspired by fear and guilty consciences, he seemed to have neither heard nor said aught save courteous words of greeting and response, words fit for the festive occasion and the solemn place of meeting, in keeping with the devotion of loyal vassals and the graciousness of a beloved monarch. Thus, to the utter bewilderment of all present, he ended on a note of innocent and sober cheerfulness, so that the Duke, respectfully drinking to his health, was obliged seriously to ask himself whether, after all, it would not be better to reach a peaceful settlement of the political problems than to resort to violence; whilst the dignitaries all around hung on the lips of the lively monarch in spell-bound admiration. Balue, who alone of all present was absorbed in his own thoughts and impervious to the charm of the King's speech, fingered the gold cross on his breast, a prey to gloomy forebodings. It seemed to him as if Necker was standing behind the King like an evil spirit in command, exercising his demoniacal powers over the submissive minds of the assembly.

But when, towards midnight, the King left the banquet and returned to his room, he cast aside the mask. Sad and dejected, he threw himself back into a chair and stared into the dying embers on the hearth. His head felt dull and heavy after the stupendous spiritual efforts of the evening, and a paralysing

lassitude followed, leaving behind it a feeling of weakness, of defenceless and nervous oppression caused by the thick stone walls about him. Wearily he got up, stepped across to the window, opened it, and through the blackness of the night sought the outlines of the tower.

"A King of France once died there," he said to Oliver in low tones, referring to Charles III, the unfortunate Carlovigian monarch who was imprisoned in the tower by a baron of Picardy and tortured to death.

The Master had expected this reaction and busied himself silently about his lord, awaiting the moment when his spirit would revive and once more grapple with the situation. Without saying a word, Louis allowed himself to be undressed.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. The King started up in terror and looked wildly about the room, as if searching for a place of concealment or a secret means of escape. Oliver waited motionless, his face darkly lowering.

"Who is there?" he enquired at last.

"May I presume," answered Balue's voice from outside, "to beg an audience of his Majesty at this late hour?"

Louis looked at the Master, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Won't to-morrow morning be time enough, Balue?" exclaimed the King peevishly.

"In that case I should not have ventured to disturb your Majesty's rest," whispered the Cardinal, with a nervous cough.

Louis lay back on his pillows and drew the coverlet up as though he wished to creep under it. Oliver bent over him.

"Speak to him, Sire," he said softly; "apparently his Eminence cannot sleep with your brick of Damocles over his head. I am thinking that for the moment his mood is none too pharisaical. Willy nilly the tortured soul is driven to truth, just as on the rack the tortured body is. Maybe you will discover all manner of things, if you continue the methods you used this evening."

The King nodded. Oliver went to the door and opened it. Balue, still fully dressed, his eyes bright with their customary energy, strode without hesitation close up to the bed. With a superhuman effort, Louis controlled his features, for he was fully aware that the observant prelate must not be allowed to see his depression and turn it to account. With an expression of

calm and cold indifference, he lay back on the pillows, and, without turning to face his visitor, merely vouchsafed him a sidelong glance from beneath half-closed lids. Oliver took up a position at the foot of the bed.

"Sire," Balue began at once, "there are two things that have troubled my soul to-night — the attitude of the Duke and that of your Majesty, both towards me and towards him, as though I were in some way connected with the obviously threatening attitude of my lord of Burgundy. You treated me, your Majesty, as if I belonged to the party of your opponents."

Louis was silent and did not stir. The Cardinal waited a few seconds, and then, in a louder voice, said:

"Sire, you treated me like a traitor!"

The King had shut his eyes and appeared to be asleep. Balue glanced in bewilderment at Necker, who, gravely leaning against the bedpost, was looking away from him. The Cardinal turned towards him and plucked his sleeve.

"Master Oliver," he said, in agitated tones, "speak. Did not the Duke's aggressive tone surprise you and make you indignant, as it did me? — you were with me when the arrangements for this meeting were made."

"No!" Necker answered bluntly.

Balue started back, but, pulling himself together, asked boldly, "How's that, Necker?"

Oliver turned to look at him, and in so doing noticed that the King had opened his eyes and was watching the scene. Balue, his mouth still open, avoided his glance.

"What is happening here?" he stammered, in stifled tones.

Then, turning to the King again, he noticed how attentive and alert he had become.

"Sire," he cried desperately, "what is your accusation against me?"

"If I have an accusation against any man," said the King softly and imperturbably, "I summon him to justice. But I never summoned you to come before me, your Eminence; you came of your own accord. What is this pressing intelligence that you have to give me?"

The Cardinal, straining every nerve to remain calm, answered quickly:

"The Constable has had an opportunity of having a few

words in secret with my Lord of Savoy," he replied, "from which it is plain that the threatening tone adopted by the Duke to-day was not a mere outburst of temper, but was merely part of the programme and policy already revealed by the escort of honour he chose to receive you, and which he is bent on carrying out."

"Did you not know this?" Louis enquired.

"Indeed, I did not!" cried Balue, in a loud voice, glancing at the Master.

The King turned towards him and repeated:

"Did you not know this, your Eminence?"

"I swear I did not!"

"Good," said Louis, with a faint smile. "Then let us drop the subject, for no one is bound to incriminate himself. And perhaps I knew it. Is that all you have to tell me?"

"I have lost your Majesty's confidence," said Balue gently, turning aside, "but I will serve you faithfully to my dying day, Sire."

"To your dying day," repeated Louis cruelly. "That is one way of putting it! But before that try at least to justify your visit at this late hour, Balue."

"In spite of all, I shall have the courage to give you my advice, Sire," said the Cardinal with dignity. "It seemed to me important that before to-morrow dawned you should have no doubts concerning the attitude of the Duke, so that you might be in a position to adopt the right tone in your negotiations. I advise you to avoid anything which might vex him, and to accede to all his demands, even those which you cannot fulfil. I also advise you to command the Grand Master to lead his troops by forced marches to the frontier of Picardy."

Somewhat taken aback, Oliver raised his head. The fellow's strategy was marvellous. To have the audacity to propose apparently effective though actually useless measures against his own plot, which was now in process of realisation, presupposed a degree of cunning which would shrink from no possible complication. The twofold object at which Balue was aiming with his advice was, of course, perfectly clear to Necker. It was a fresh attempt at recovering confidence or at finding out how much the King knew and what his plans were; and, should the latter show the faintest sign of being influenced, Oliver was

afraid the prelate might pursue his methods yet further, and, lifting the veil ever higher at the wrong end, prevail upon the King to confess his doubts and his sense of uncertainty. Then the game would be lost! In spite of the risk which he himself would run, Oliver was already prepared to drive the Cardinal step by step to a revelation of the truth, and by force of the fact that he himself was a person initiated into the conspiracy, wring from him a confession of the whole plot. But Louis' look of disapproval enabled him to keep silence.

"As to the manner in which I should treat the Duke, Monsignor," said the King coldly, "I am already well informed. I was fully aware of it at least as early as yesterday evening. But you must surely know that no French courier would be allowed to leave the town or to pass the Burgundian outposts without being examined? I must therefore conclude, Balue, that you only wished to find out whether, possibly before I came here, I had not already ordered Dammartin to follow me with his troops."

A smile played about Oliver's lips. Balue drew himself up.

"Again I ask you, Sire, do you regard me as a traitor?"

The King appeared not to hear the question, and passed a hand wearily over his brow.

"Have you anything else to say to me?" he asked.

"No, Sire," said Balue, his face hardening, and he bowed low. Louis looked up furtively.

"Have you nothing more to say to me, your Eminence?"

"No, Sire."

The King turned his head away.

"Oliver," he said wearily, "you are witness of this conversation; take note of his Eminence's 'no.'"

"Sire, what do you mean?" cried Balue.

Louis waved his hand as though he were bored.

"You may leave us, Balue," he said. "I might have made you swear your 'no' by the crucifix on your breast, and you may as well be prepared to have to do so. Now I want to go to sleep."

"Sire," pleaded the Cardinal with quivering lips, "do you regard me as a traitor?"

The King did not seem to hear him, and Oliver, with an inscrutable expression, conducted the prelate out.

When he had closed the door behind him, Louis sprang up eagerly.

"Oliver," he cried excitedly, "do you think he has betrayed me?"

Necker strode to and fro as if he were weighing the probabilities. Then, standing before the bed and pressing his fists to his temples, he said firmly:

"I think he has."

THE negotiations opened on the Monday morning. The King, who was again in excellent spirits, succeeded from the beginning through his imperturbable equanimity in maintaining the mastery he had secured on the previous evening. He adopted tactics which, while they were compatible with an attitude of kindly detachment, nevertheless proved that his consciousness of his own aims was protected both by knowledge and will from all possible surprises, intrigues and plots. The object of his adversary, which was forthwith to use such unscrupulousness and force, not stopping short even of blackmail, as to force the Valois at once to assume the defensive and, through his anxiety regarding his own personal safety, to give up political scheming, had miscarried from the beginning. Self-reliant and apparently unperturbed, Louis had taken the lead, and had so simply and naturally filled the position of King that he had made it more difficult for his opponent to venture upon any molestation of his person or to attempt any forcible control of the course of the negotiations. As once again Louis had failed to refer to the veiled threats made at his reception, the Duke showed no inclination to repeat them. Possibly he thought it better to wait until the mechanism of the conspiracy, the precise scope of which was as yet undecided, had had time to work its effect, and the King had played his trump card. Thanks to Oliver's insinuations and the King's behaviour, he had grown as irresolute as the other conspirators. But, more important still, his old mistrust of the Cardinal and his displeasure at the presence of the Constable had increased. The extraordinary scene between Louis and Balue at the banquet had not passed unnoticed by him, and he had read much from what they had left unsaid. But in the light of Oliver's remarks, he interpreted the dialogue as a well-acted scene and almost a proof of their collusion, and

believed it had been played to put their opponents off the scent and to turn the situation to account in a way of which he could as yet form no conception, with the object of attaining a certain end. He was inclined to regard it as a confirmation of his old suspicions that Balue was no more than one of the King's *agents provocateurs* against him, and that his collaboration in the reorganisation of the League and the arrangement of the present meeting was but a fresh triumph for the policy of the Valois. For the same reasons he mistrusted Count St. Pol, whom he had never forgiven for his defection to France, and his acceptance of the post of Constable. His conditional adherence to the new League he had long regarded as merely a plausible argument on the part of the Cardinal, for he could see no proof that they were acting together, nor had the Count made any personal efforts to be reconciled to him. Indeed, he regarded the latter's presence in Péronne as a deliberate affront on the King's part, particularly as the explanation of it given by Necker and conveyed to him by Heer van Busleyden was too transparently untrue.

The King's proposal to open the discussions with the subject of Brittany and his unmistakable desire to question the value of this ally of Burgundy seemed by chance to meet the Duke's attitude half way. Louis, however, had in this matter followed the advice of Oliver, on no account to raise the question of the Flemish towns and Liége, or to allow himself to be inveigled into giving proofs of his resolute neutrality and loyalty before the secret messenger had returned from Liége. The King set skilfully to work, giving the impression that no subject could be of greater importance than the one he was discussing, and succeeded so well that none of the other questions at issue was even mentioned on that day. He then proceeded to give a full and detailed explanation of the motives for his campaign in Brittany, and in his description of the Duke of Brittany contrived, in his own inimitable way, to appear as though he were talking not to an ally of his enemy but to a friend who shared his views. Once more the Duke refrained from expressing either agreement or surprise, for he had good reason for supposing that the strange Monsieur le Mauvais was anything but a silly chatterbox. On the contrary, he was probably one of the King's finest instruments, despite the fact that he did not be-

lieve Oliver's assertion which had been communicated to him, that the King had already in his pocket the terms of a separate treaty with Brittany. And as the King, like a skilful dramatist, increased the suspense and was in no hurry to unravel the knot, the Duke suspected that the Chamberlain's remark was only part of a well thought out plan to anticipate the eloquent manœuvres of his master, and had little to do with fact.

In the course of the afternoon the Duke opened the attack unexpectedly. He said that he had certainly heard rumours — which had begun to be circulated a few days ago — that a separate peace between France and Brittany was a certainty, but he presumed he might calmly relegate them to the realm of fable, as His Majesty would certainly not have omitted all reference to so important a fact at the beginning of the discussion. For a moment the King was confounded. He felt that he had been robbed of his final effect, which he had skilfully planned with the object of crowning his introductory remarks by the triumphant and astonishing revelation of a sensational *fait accompli*. But he soon recovered his composure.

"It is my way, cousin, in friendly conversation, to keep the facts to the end, so that I may the better carry conviction without the constraints they impose. My present aim is to convince you of the inferiority of your ally, not of the defeat of an enemy. I grant you that the rumour is true, but it proves only his defeat, and does not therefore reveal the whole truth."

The Duke could no longer conceal his fears. Louis carelessly produced two rolls of parchment.

"Here is the treaty of peace, cousin, which will be ratified on my return. And here is the proof of your ally's inferiority — a letter in which the Duke solemnly abjures his alliance with Burgundy."

The Duke flushed with anger as he glanced through the documents, but said not a word. That what had appeared to be merely a political manœuvre should have turned out to be a reality, and should prove of greater significance and wider scope than the unverified rumours had led him to suppose, unnerved him more than the fact itself. That the Valois should be using truth as an instrument and, at a moment which was in any case extremely bewildering, should have snatched from the Duke the weapon of mistrust, upset him so completely as

almost to paralyse his wits. What was he to believe? What was he not to believe? What was he to do, and what was he to leave undone, to avoid falling into the trap he had set for his enemy? How could he continue to assume that the King's unaccountably confident bearing had no meaning or reason? There were, indeed, only two ways of replying. He could have recourse to brute force or to humble submission. For fear of betraying himself, he said nothing. His brain was in such a ferment that he dared not reply. As he saw the light of triumph shining in the eyes of the King, he could hardly suppress an outburst of rage, and finally, stammering like a schoolboy who has been caned, excused himself on the score of pressing business and closed the negotiations for the day.

WITH an anxiety which increased from hour to hour, Oliver awaited the arrival of Brother Fradin. His own calculations and the increasing nervousness of Balue and the Constable told him that the fateful echo of events in Liége must be heard within the next few hours. A necessary condition to his being able to save the King and tear down the sinister screen of secrets without himself falling with it was for him to be the first to turn the news to account. The thousand and one dangers which might have defeated the monk's mission, the manifold accidents which might cause a reverberation of the events to travel more quickly than human feet, and thus forestall fate by a few hours, tortured his brain with terrifying visions. Without the support of the alleged eye-witnesses, the bold step he had planned and cleverly prepared would prove abortive, and as early as Tuesday the tornado from Liége might blow upon them and effectually put an end to all hope of resistance. Doom seemed to be descending upon them merciless and irresistible as an iceberg; the loophole of escape would not long remain open, and whilst, owing to the favourable course of the day's events, the King's confidence had increased, Necker's courage began to ebb.

But about seven o'clock in the evening Daniel Bart, who had been watching the arrivals on the Cambrai road all day, came to him and whispered a few words in his ear. Oliver's face glowed as if the sun were on it, and, slipping on a long grebe-trimmed cloak, such as was worn by the Florentine doctors, he hurried to the church of St. John. In a corner hard by the high

altar knelt Brother Fradin. The Master dropped on his knees beside him so close that their shoulders almost touched.

"Can we count on Heuriblocq?" he asked in a whisper.

The monk nodded. Master Pieter was in an inn and would not stir from it, as the presence of Daniel Bart was obviously causing him great uneasiness, and also because he had come to have implicit faith in Fradin. Liège was full of excitement and rumours. The Bishop and the Governor had tried to escape to Tongres; he did not know whether they had succeeded. In the midst of all the alarming events, the news that he was on the list of the proscribed had seemed so credible to the terrified taxgatherer that he had gratefully seized the saving hand held out to him by the monk, and had followed him without hesitation in the garb of a Franciscan friar.

Fradin raised himself a little and murmured with fervent emphasis:

"Libenter gloriabor infirmitatibus meis. . ."

Oliver gave a contented nod. The two were apparently engaged in silent prayer a little while longer, then Necker whispered:

"Daniel will tell you to-morrow morning what time you must go to the Chancellor, and also when Pieter will have to go, and what you will both have to report to him."

The monk nodded and continued his orisons.

"I know how to be grateful, Brother Thoon," Necker whispered with unexpected heartiness, "as you already know. The next Franciscan priorship will be yours."

Fradin crossed himself:

"In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti."

They both said Amen. Rising to his feet, Oliver hastened back to the castle, his mind full of the decisions which would have to be made during the next few hours, and his heart thumping disconcertingly.

The King was dictating to his secretary in good Italian a letter for the Duke of Milan, the contents of which he had discussed with Oliver an hour previously. As Necker had learnt from Balue that the French courier's bag was searched and censored by the Burgundian Chancellor, he had deliberately framed the King's missive with an eye to its being examined. Thus, when Crèveœur read the letter to Duke Sforza, he found

that the King requested Milan to cease hostilities against Savoy, as he was paying a friendly visit to Charles of Burgundy, and was making earnest endeavours in conjunction with him to bring about peace. But the ciphers which were secretly placed between the lines countermanding these orders and instructing the Duke to prosecute operations to a decisive issue, could hardly be seen by the Chancellor, much less deciphered.

Louis gave Necker a friendly nod as he entered. He was still in a good temper, as he always was when his own methods had a chance of being applied. But as soon as he saw by the tension in Oliver's face that he had decisive news to deliver, he became grave and stopped dictating.

"Until later on, Master Albertus," he said. "Leave us for the moment."

The secretary left the room. The King enquired anxiously: "What is the matter, Oliver? What has happened?"

Necker strode up to him with a strange light in his eyes.

"Sire," he said in a low voice, "you must be strong; you must regard your suspicions henceforward as facts."

Pallid to the lips, Louis fell back in his chair, his hands trembling.

"You must be strong, Sire," Oliver repeated emphatically. "Your own conduct alone can save you." Then, leaning forward and whispering in the King's ear, he added: "My messenger has returned. Liège is now in a state of insurrection. Von Wildt has struck too soon. . . ."

He stopped. The King, in a paroxysm of rage, thumped the carved arms of his chair right and left with his fists. Then, growing calmer, he turned the matter over in his mind, his eyes looking dull and small in a face inflated with passion.

"What a damnable coincidence!" he exclaimed at last. "But it is no proof of treachery!"

Oliver looked him straight in the face and said gently and clearly:

"Von Wildt has struck too soon — at the command of the Constable."

Louis clutched the knobs of his chair and raised himself slowly from the seat, his back bowed as though beneath a heavy burden. His face was swollen and the knotted veins on his brow

looked as though they would burst. His eyes, which glared into space, were aflame and suffused with such bottomless hatred that Oliver drew back with a shudder. The King passed by him with heavy steps, his arms hanging loosely down, his back round and hunched, and paced the room, his eyes searching the walls like those of a lunatic. He came to a stand in front of Necker and supported himself on his shoulders, as though he were afraid his legs were about to give way beneath him.

"Yes . . ." he panted, "yes . . . I understand, understand . . . I see no escape, friend. . . ."

"Sire," said Oliver, with eager emphasis, "the Duke does not know it yet!"

The King drew himself up quickly, though he did not let go of Oliver. His eyes hung incredulously and imploringly on the lips of his companion.

"Balue?"

"His Eminence," said Oliver, with a faint smile, "seems to have reckoned with certainty on the news of the revolt in Liège reaching Péronne to-morrow or the day after. But he is wrong, for we two are the only ones who know it to-day. Neither he nor the Constable knows it yet."

Louis released his hold. His face had grown set and determined, and in a moment was animated by fresh energy.

"At last I see it all," he said, with furrowed brow. "I also see the only way of escape, which my Oliver has prepared for me. We must somehow or other turn our stolen march to account."

"Yes, Sire," said Necker eagerly. "We must be the ones to report the news to the Duke, and we must do it this very night. It would be as well if I undertook the task. To-morrow morning early my messenger, a Flemish monk, who is devoted to me and is in touch with Crévecœur, will, apparently quite independently of us, give the Chancellor confirmation of the news; while at midday his companion, a distinguished Burgundian official in Liège, who is a native of Ghent, over whom for certain reasons I am able to exercise some influence, will also bear independent testimony to the Duke regarding the catastrophe, and interpret it in our favour. Then we shall be able to await the arrival of direct news of the rebellion more

calmly. For the edge will have been taken off the Duke's rage, and your attitude of omniscience and superiority will not have been undermined."

Louis gazed at him.

"Oliver," he murmured with emotion, "my Oliver!"

Necker dreaded any word of thanks from the King. The last few days had shaken and tortured his soul too much to allow him to thrust his secret feelings calmly and obediently into the background as he had been able to do hitherto. He felt that shame might create confusion in his brain, and that the King's gratitude might weaken him. It was essential at all costs to stifle any feelings which could possibly disturb the sober working of his will, or destroy his sang-froid. With a few hurried words he forestalled the King's reply.

"It is, above all, necessary, Sire, that you should remain just as you were. You must not reveal the slightest sign of weakness, or despondency, not the shadow of a doubt of yourself. On the contrary, you must exploit your powers of suggestion and the rapier of your dialectic to the point of brutality. The Duke has a sharp eye, St. Pol has a sharper, and Balue's are sharpest of all, Sire!"

Louis paced gloomily to and fro.

"If ever I get out of this hole," he murmured, "Tristan will have his work cut out for him!"

"For the moment, your Majesty, these are secondary considerations," Oliver observed relentlessly. "You must reflect that his Eminence and the Constable, whose punishment you probably have in mind, are thinking much the same themselves. So if you wish to get them into your power, you must not show the slightest signs of any desire for revenge. Wear them out by means of uncertainties and equivocalities of all kinds, but avoid uttering a single open word of menace. We may have to play you off against the Duke. I hope very soon to be clear as to the furthest ramifications of the conspiracy. I think we shall probably make all manner of strange discoveries, which will be useful in framing our future policy."

"Our future policy?" repeated the King, smiling sadly. "Who can tell whether I shall be the agent of it?"

Necker forced him at once to return to the matter in hand.

"What sum of money has Monsieur de Beaune at his dis-

posal?" he asked, apparently quite irrelevantly. "I may possibly require money for what I want to do."

"The treasury carts contain about twenty thousand silver dollars," replied the King, again adopting a businesslike tone. "You may have fifteen thousand to use for your own good purposes. Don't stint yourself, Oliver, and if necessary spend the whole lot."

They then discussed the steps to be taken during the course of the next few hours, the attitude to be adopted towards the suite, and Oliver's mission to the Duke. It was Oliver's endeavour to forearm the King against attacks of discouragement by a meticulous care which did not overlook the smallest detail and arranged for what was to be said and done at every stage. He soon perceived from Louis' increasing precision and his growing consciousness of purpose while working with him that no further attack of weakness was to be feared, and he imperceptibly curbed the driving power of his own will and handed over the intellectual leadership to the King.

FORTUNATELY in the ante-chamber to the Duke's apartments Oliver found Melchior van Busleyden among the other chamberlains. The latter raised his head in surprise when he saw the King's confidant appear at such an unusual hour—it must have been about ten o'clock. The Master went straight up to him and drew him into a corner.

"Sir," he whispered, "my exalted master has sent me on an urgent message to my Lord of Burgundy, and the matter allows of neither hesitation nor ceremony. I should be much obliged if you could secure me an audience."

Busleyden hesitated. The Duke was far from being in a good temper, and had already been closeted with Crèveœur for some considerable time, having given instructions that he was not to be disturbed. With his customary smile, Oliver added:

"Come, sir, are you not somewhat beholden to me? Was the information I gave you a little while ago no good? Would the Duke have appointed a certain noble his cupbearer at the banquet if he had done bad diplomatic work for him? It seems hardly likely."

"Certainly I owe you my thanks," said Busleyden, much

flattered. "But I should be very much surprised if the news the King has to give him, which in all probability merely concerns the negotiations, could not wait until early to-morrow. Let me warn you in all friendliness that you might appear at an inopportune moment and meet with small success, Chamberlain."

Oliver showed signs of impatience.

"If you only knew what it was about, sir," he said with some irritation, "you would marvel at your temerity in having delayed the fate of history by the fraction of a second. Just remember our conversation, I beg you, and call to mind how it ended; for you were in duty bound to impart that to the Duke, as well as the rest of my information. So pray tell him that I have an urgent message concerning Liège. And thus you will probably be doing your career an equal if not a greater service."

The officer started back in alarm, not heeding the irony of the last words. The other courtiers had now become interested, and their faces revealed their curiosity. But, without vouchsafing a word, Busleyden brushed quickly by them and vanished into the adjoining room. Some time elapsed. Oliver was pleased that the lieutenant apparently had more to say than the mere message warranted, and endeavoured by his bearing and movements to convince the prying eyes about him that he was experiencing difficulty in controlling his agitation. At last Busleyden returned with a frightened expression, and, without saying a word, led him to the Duke.

The room they entered was small and badly lighted, and, like the other inhabited apartments of the castle, showed signs of the distressing combination of hurriedly organised pomp and gloomy decay. The Duke was impatiently pacing to and fro within the short distance separating window and door, and his broad shoulders looked as though they were threatening to burst the walls asunder. He appeared not to notice the entrance of the two men. Near the window, motionless, with his arms crossed and his face in the shadow, stood the Chancellor. Oliver bowed low and remained silent on the threshold. He noticed with some satisfaction that Busleyden did not leave the room, but had taken up a position on the other side of the door.

Without stopping his walk to and fro or looking at anybody, the Duke suddenly burst out, and shaking his fists, roared out in a voice like thunder:

"If my Lord of Valois takes me for a nincompoop, he has a perfect right to do so — just as I have a right to take him for a fox. But the fox is in the trap, and the nincompoop is not. And that is the difference between us. And I should advise anybody who is cunningly endeavouring to gain overmuch advantage in a single day to remember that. It is impossible to slip through the bars of a cage by means of insinuations made even at this time of night!"

He suddenly stopped in front of Oliver.

"You can tell His Majesty that if in very truth he is better informed than I am about the situation in Liège, and is prepared to acknowledge this, then he is confessing something which I have long suspected, and which I am glad to know for certain. You can tell him that if this is so, I could hardly regard his information as an example of cunning, and that he had better think over his midnight message to me again."

"Pardon me, your Highness," Oliver rejoined, raising his voice, "I would gladly take upon myself the responsibility of delivering my message to you at this very moment. May I remind you that yesterday I had the honour of replying to a similar expression of mistrust on your part, and I told you that we should soon be able to give you proofs to the contrary. That meant we were already at work on these proofs, and that the King had made up his mind to justify himself in your eyes once and for all when he accepted your hospitality."

He interrupted himself and turned to the lieutenant. "Perhaps I may beg Heer van Busleyden to bear witness to the fact that as one of the King's delegates I gave him true and straightforward information regarding all the motives for this meeting, as also about my exalted master's anxiety concerning Liège."

"I know that, I know that!" exclaimed the Duke impatiently.

"Very well, your Highness," Necker continued, with all the greater equanimity as he saw that the prince was looking anxious, "very well, your Highness, and you also know that the first two days of the meeting confirmed the truth and

straightforwardness of my communications on every point which allowed of proof. You also saw from His Majesty's behaviour that a good conscience and adequate information sufficed to meet a somewhat strange and insidious conception of the demands of hospitality. . . ."

"In the Devil's name, sir," cried Burgundy, stamping his foot, "who gave you the right to utter such criticism?"

"You yourself, my lord," Oliver answered coldly, "through your criticism of the King in whose name I speak."

In the firm tones of the servant the Duke heard again the enigmatic and bewildering assurance of his master, and with a movement of irritation, he resumed his walk up and down.

"Come to the point," he said shortly; and in businesslike tones the Master began his report.

"As I have already informed Heer van Busleyden, the King had commanded the Constable to keep watch from Luxemburg over any movements in the neighbourhood of Liège, and when he arrived here he had already received information that Johann von Wildt, the German freelance, was lying in wait with a large body of troops in the Ardennes, and was probably in touch or even in alliance with the people of Liège. Though he was not absolutely certain of the connection, my exalted master would have called your attention to its possibility to-morrow. But only an hour ago news reached us from the Constable's headquarters that von Wildt's troops had marched off in the direction of Liège and that in the villages of the Meuse valley through which he had passed, it was already known that, with his support, the town had rebelled against Burgundy. My exalted master considered it his duty to put you immediately in possession of this news and to recommend you to adopt counter measures as soon as possible. As far as we can tell, the confirmation of the dread intelligence should reach here not later than to-morrow morning. My exalted master, however, can give you triple proof of his loyalty. First of all through this announcement, secondly through his presence here at such a moment, and finally through the presence of the German lanceknights themselves, who will be discovered among the rank and file of Liège."

As soon as Oliver opened his mouth, the Duke stopped still and listened with growing agitation. Then, with jaws set,

he bowed his head like a bull about to charge, and Crèveœur went hastily up to him and whispered a few words in his ear.

"Busleyden," said the Duke in hoarse tones, "the Marshal and the army leaders must be here within an hour."

The lieutenant departed. Again the Duke stared down at the floor and then suddenly looked straight at Oliver. His face was convulsed with conflicting emotions. He was searching for a reply which would be both prudent and honourable. The Chancellor, knowing the Duke's nature, so prone to sudden outbursts, dreaded a fresh imprudence, and felt the necessity to interfere, the more so as he was aware of the dangerous eloquence of the other side.

"Chamberlain," he said courteously, "pray give His Majesty the assurance of our most cordial thanks."

"Yes," gasped the Duke roughly.

Oliver bowed and left the room.

In order to avoid the company of Balue and St. Pol and the necessity of speaking to them before the Master could return with his final report, the King had pleaded indisposition and had not left his room. And to prevent the two men from guessing that the pending disclosures were in any way connected with Oliver's movements, he had ingeniously contrived to send Bourbon, Jean de Beaune and the Provost Marshal backwards and forwards on various errands, so as to prevent the Cardinal and the Constable from having an opportunity of speaking to each other alone for one moment. The Provost Marshal with his sad smile, or the obviously reticent Treasurer was ever beside them, and when the gentlemen retired to their rooms the Provost was full of such polite attentions to Count St. Pol as they walked through the room that separated the Cardinal's bedroom from that of the Constable that the latter was only able to call out good-night over his companion's head.

On his return, Oliver had to go through the Cardinal's room. Balue sprang upon him like a beast of prey.

"Look out for your head, Necker," he exclaimed; "you seem to have decided too late to be against us!"

Oliver looked at him with a smile.

"Certainly I shall look out for my head, and you had better do the same, your Eminence!"

Balue held him back by the arm.

"In the name of all the saints, Master, what is going on here? What does the King know?"

Necker shrugged his shoulders. Then he observed cautiously:

"If I knew, Monsignor, you would know also. I can only surmise that we have fallen into our own trap. Now it is up to each of us to get out of it as best we can. And it does not look as if it were going to be easy."

With a jerk of his shoulders, he released himself and in a moment had reached the door of the adjoining room. Jean de Beaune, who was sitting on his bed, nodded sullenly at him.

"Oh, how I long for Touraine!" he said, pulling a grimace, "so much that I could even feel tempted to provoke your jealousy, Master."

Oliver's expression darkened. Tristan laughed:

"Don't stir up the human passions of our Devil just now, Jean. For a moment we are entirely dependent on his being able to exercise his infernal calling in peace. No offence, Master. If you can get us out of this ante-chamber of hell, I will gladly hand over my somewhat dilapidated soul to you."

Oliver went on as if he were deaf. In the third room he found the Constable, standing at the window, drumming on the panes. He turned round to see who had entered, but soon averted his head and shrugged his shoulders in disgust.

Oliver, vouchsafing him only a glance of contempt, went his way. The fourth room was empty; Necker found Bourbon with the King, and knew that the Duke had been told all.

Louis raised his head expectantly. He seemed calm and confident and his clear eyes proved that he was conscious of being able to achieve his object. With a smile Oliver said:

"My Lord of Burgundy assures His Majesty of his grateful thanks, and will continue his raving at a Council of War."

"Good, my friend," said Louis. "And you, brother, will now have the goodness to make Oliver's excuses to certain gentlemen and go off again on some excuse or other. Kill time for a quarter of an hour, then come back with an anxious face and invite Balue, St. Pol and my two friends to appear before their King."

Bourbon left the room. Louis threw back his head and closed his eyes for a moment.

"I don't suppose the Duke found it easy to express his thanks," he observed in low tones.

"He found it so difficult," Oliver rejoined gravely, "that Crèveœur expressed them for him, and all he did was to say 'Yes.' But what closed his mouth was not so much incredulity as uncertainty. Now we must wait to see what the morrow brings."

They were both silent. From the courtyard below there rose the sound of hurrying footsteps, of orders being given and the clash of arms. Oliver saw the King's brows twitch anxiously, and began to talk loud and fast in order to drown the alarming sounds of hostility below. Without a moment's loss of time, he prevented the King from harbouring any thought which might lead to weakness or fear, and once more revived his flagging spirits by telling him reports about the conspiracy, making suggestions regarding its ramifications, which gradually became ever more clearly defined, as if through his own observations and bribes and the help of skilful assistants he had hour by hour reached a better understanding of the situation. He very wisely confined himself to explaining the parts Balue and St. Pol had played in the dark game, and therefore had less need to warn the King, who was already thinking over the approaching interview, to be cautious in his treatment of the two men. Nor was there any need for him to alter a single detail in the mode of procedure already agreed upon.

In a little while Bourbon returned, and, after remaining for a short time in the room, summoned the four gentlemen, in the name of his royal brother. Louis, with stony countenance, was sitting stiff as a judge in his high-backed chair, the effect of which was accentuated by the cold piercing expression with which he received the Constable and the cruel, hangman look with which he met the Cardinal's eye. St. Pol stood pale and calm, his square chin thrust slightly forward, his legs apart. Jean de Beaune and the Provost Marshal, the one flushed with expectation and the other calm and collected and taking a professional interest in the proceedings, remained in the background. Balue, though he was very pale, assumed a pose full of dignity and met the King's glance with astonishing fortitude. Oliver stood behind Louis' chair in the shadow of the wall.

"My lords," said the King in a faint, almost indifferent voice, "I have to inform you that Liège is in rebellion."

Balue was heard to groan.

"Von Wildt," Louis continued, in the same tone, "has struck too soon, whether on his own account, or in response to a definite order, or by chance, I will not for the moment attempt to determine."

He looked at the Constable. St. Pol bowed his head and great drops of perspiration gleamed on his brow. The King proceeded calmly, almost monotonously:

"At the instigation of Burgundy? This is hardly possible and could only conceivably be the case seeing that it has happened while I chance to be in Péronne. This possibility may therefore be dismissed. For the Duke, who was the first to whom I sent the news as soon as it reached me, is as astonished as I am myself, and as you also seem to be, my lords."

With a scarcely perceptible yet inordinately malicious smile, he looked at St. Pol and Balue, glancing from the one to the other. The Cardinal had folded his hands on his breast and entwined his fingers to conceal their trembling.

"Sire," he said with a cough, "sire. . . ."

"My lords," Louis resumed, without paying any heed to him, "this interlude seems designed to paralyse the negotiations and endanger the personal safety of your King. It would be terrible if any conscious will had busied itself with such means for compassing my doom — terrible for the instigator, for the plan would have miscarried. So far as a man can be armed against Fate, I am armed. I beg you, therefore, my lords, in the days before us to be brave and confident and remember the oaths which bind you to me. Believe me, I shall yet have the opportunity and power to remember your fidelity. I would have you take note, my lords, that I have not gone into the question of the responsibility of any one of you for this development of the situation, which possibly may not be without significance. I forbid you from this moment to leave the wing of the castle which has been allotted to us, without my permission, or to hold any independent intercourse or parley with the opposing party, or to communicate any information whatsoever, spoken or written. In so doing I am not animated by any feeling of mistrust; it is merely that I may keep a firm hold over developments. You may go now, my lords. Good-night."

"Sire," Balue ventured to exclaim once more, "one word. . . ."

"Sire," said the Constable, "with your permission. . ."

The King stood up and repeated in somewhat louder tones:

"Good-night, my lords!"

Necker threw open the door.

THE fateful storm burst on the Tuesday. Early in the morning, Brother Fradin had discharged his mission to Crèvecœur, but before Heuriblocq, whom Daniel never allowed out of his sight, and before whose eyes he took care to dangle a heavy purse, containing a thousand dollars, as well as a short, broad and useful dagger, could repair to the castle at the hour arranged, the news fell like a thunderbolt. Fugitives poured in from Liège bringing news of the terrible insurrection, and of the flight of the Bishop and of the lieutenant and their suites to Tongres. Fugitives also poured in from Tongres and announced that the people of Liège had unexpectedly attacked their town and murdered their Bishop and the Burgundian viceroy and massacred their suites. Others, on the contrary, knew nothing of these horrors and could only testify to the seizure of the prelates, whilst some declared that they had seen French *agents provocateurs* among the insurgents. Pieter Heuriblocq, the Burgundian taxgatherer, however, who was the first important official from the scene of the insurrection to reach the castle, and whose evidence was therefore heard with profound attention, declared that he had seen German lanceknights in the ranks of the insurgents. At his own request, he was sent as courier with pressing orders to Brussels. Fresh fugitives arrived with later reports. As is always the case, the echoes of the catastrophe were confused, contradictory and exaggerated in their haste and horror, so that Péronne once more resounded with the most outrageous reports.

At midday the Duke issued the ill-omened order that the gates of the castle were to be closed. His meaning was impenetrable, and these orders boded no good. Since Necker's report of the previous night, all communication with the King and his suite had ceased. A strong guard separated the west wing of the castle from the outer world. The Valois and his attendants were apparently prisoners. Louis expressed the wish to speak to the

Duke. The officer in command of the guard returned with the answer that his lord was overwhelmed with work but would call upon the King as soon as it was convenient.

Oliver was full of anxiety. The attitude of the Duke terrified him. His fear lest the latter should refuse to acknowledge the well planned proof of the King's innocence, difficult though it was to do so, or might dispute the arguments in support of it, or frustrate them by brute force, seemed about to be realised in the most terrible manner. Against this unexpected bursting of the bonds binding the Duke's mental and physical activities, Oliver knew of no means of escape.

The leaden hours, as they dragged slowly by, seemed to thicken the atmosphere in the gloomy rooms and make breathing difficult. The King was apparently in a trance. He sat in his chair without uttering a word or moving a muscle, his hands resting right and left on the arms of the chair, his head thrown back, his chin slightly tilted. He seemed to be thinking and waiting. None of the suite dared to leave their apartments or to speak. Balue and St. Pol, each in his own room, strode restlessly to and fro or sat for hours at a time as if rooted to the spot, thinking, thinking. The others waited. Oliver kept his eyes on the King.

At last night fell. Attendants, bearing dishes of food, passed the chain of guards and silently laid the evening meal. When in due course they returned they found the room empty, the chairs unmoved, the food untouched.

It was a strange night. Gloom and silence reigned in all the rooms. Only in the King's chamber was there a glimmer of light and a whispering of voices. In answer to a sudden alert question on the part of the King, which in its penetrating and all-embracing wisdom bore witness to the hard thinking he had been doing during the last few hours, Oliver traced the conspiracy in all its bearings. Then ingeniously drawing the King's attention to the actual basis of the plot, namely the new League of the Public Weal, he gave as the source of his information that agent of Crèveœur whose devotion he had secured and whom he had already placed under an obligation in Paris. As the fact that the rebel League had been reorganised was not unknown to the King, and had already been connected in his mind with Péronne, he showed no signs of either astonishment

or suspicion, and the names which Oliver proceeded to give him were familiar to him as those of important and dangerous adversaries.

The two sat together like judges at a weird tribunal. The fate of men was decided and great plans for the reconstruction of the state were roughly outlined. The stillness outside was broken from time to time by the changing of the guard, words of command and the clash of arms. Inside, the imprisoned monarch framed the policy of France. At last he grew silent again, preoccupied by other thoughts. "Duke Charles of France . . . Nemours . . . St. Pol . . . Balue," he murmured.

Necker knew that these were so many sentences of death and recalled that night in Orleans when he had staggered the Cardinal by the mention of these names. He remembered too that Balue had noticed the omission of Oliver's own name and wished to have it included. With a secret shudder he contemplated the relentless cold grey features of the King, on whom he had suddenly turned his eyes, and felt as if the blood were leaving his lips.

"What is the matter, Oliver?" Louis demanded.

Necker forced himself to smile. His brain sought wildly for a suitable reply, and he found the best — the one which summed up all his meditations during that grievous day.

"I believe, Sire, I have hit upon a plan which will save you — for the moment!"

Louis looked at him with eager expectation.

"'Pon my soul, Sire," Oliver cried, "it may mean salvation. — Tell the Duke to march on Liège with you at his side."

The King sprang excitedly to his feet; his eyes were gleaming and he paced thoughtfully up and down the room.

"This may indeed mean salvation, my Oliver," he repeated thoughtfully.

It was almost daybreak before the two lay down to rest. But they rose again very early. The King seemed rested and refreshed; the night's discussion had strengthened him like a sound sleep. He filled the morning with make-believe councils, to which he invited his brother-in-law, Tristan, and Beaune, as well as Balue and St. Pol. As the afternoon wore by without any signs of the Duke or any news of him, and Louis could not help fearing that he might have quitted Péronne, and without

saying a word have left his guest in custody, Oliver attempted before night fell to make his way through the chain of guards. In front of the steps leading to the castle quadrangle, two fair-haired guards of gigantic stature silently crossed their halberds and barred his path. Oliver halted. He noticed that on every stair the guards had been doubled.

"In the name of the King," he shouted at the top of his voice in Flemish, "fetch the officer of the guard!"

The soldiers passed on the order and in a few minutes a young noble ascended the stairs. Oliver called to him as he came up:

"In the name of the King I bid you lead me to the Duke, with a message from His Majesty, or send Heer van Busleyden, to whom I will entrust the message in your presence."

Completely taken aback, the officer begged him to wait, and in ten minutes returned with Busleyden, whose face bore the signs of a sleepless night.

"Sir," said Necker in loud tones, regardless of the armed guards crowding the well of the staircase, "the King will neither see nor say what it were terrible to see or say. He begs leave to inform his cousin and vassal, Charles of Burgundy, that he was and is ready to take supreme command of the punitive expedition against Liège!"

Busleyden blinked his eyes in astonishment, whereupon Necker leant forward and whispered in his ear:

"If the three proofs given before do not already lie heavy on the conscience of every gentleman here, this fourth proof must surely kindle such a blush of shame that these very walls will lose their coat of grey! It behoves you and Crèveœur to see to it that the Duke's disgrace does not cling to him throughout his life, outside Péronne as well as here. But His Majesty forgives him and will be silent."

Busleyden bowed his head.

"The Duke is harassed enough," he whispered. "But I will make him come."

He hastened away. Necker hurried back to the King and reported his success. Louis smiled and stretched his arms.

"If he comes," he said, with a look of cunning, "then Europe will to-night be richer by a separate peace and the poorer by a wretched League. If he comes, there will be sung

to-morrow in the churches of Péronne and in three days' time in the cathedrals of Paris the strangest Te Deum that was ever chanted to the glory of God."

Oliver returned to his post on the stairs, again passing through the rooms of the King's gentlemen, who looked after him with enquiry or torture in their eyes. But his face remained inscrutable. For nearly half an hour he waited with apparent unconcern, leaning against a huge pillar. Suddenly from the direction of the quadrangle strange sounds were heard. The soldiers on the landings of the stairs froze into figures of steel. The Duke in coat of mail and cuisses, his fine head bare, clanked up the stairs. Oliver bowed and looked into his face. It was drawn with lack of sleep, inner conflict and the blows which the fleeting hours had brought.

"His Most Christian Majesty is awaiting you with eager expectation, my lord," said Oliver formally. "Thanks to a fateful concatenation of circumstances, he has attained his great object sooner and with greater certainty than he had ventured to hope. For to-morrow the bells will already be pealing through the length and breadth of France and Burgundy."

The Duke looked at him in great astonishment and suddenly flushed.

"Let us hope so," he replied, turning abruptly away. Then he added more quietly:

"Sieur le Mauvais, you are more dangerous than the whole of the Valois' army. I ought to have either beheaded you or made you my minister."

"My head does not belong to me," said Necker, laughing ironically, "so I may perhaps be allowed to say that it would have been hard for it or for you, your Highness, if it had belonged to a Burgundian minister."

The Duke went on as if he had not heard; Oliver followed a few steps behind him. Meanwhile Louis had informed the members of his suite that he was expecting the Duke. The doors of their rooms stood open. The Cardinal was sitting on a chair and seemed to be absorbed in his breviary. He did not stand up as the Duke strode through his room, but merely bowed his head in greeting and cast a rapid glance at his hard profile as he barely acknowledged him, and at Oliver's impassive countenance. Tristan and Jean de Beaune, waiting one on each side of

the door, bowed courteously. St. Pol was standing in front of the window, his legs apart and arms folded, and, without greeting the Duke, boldly stared at him as he passed from door to door. The Duke pressed his lips tightly together. Bourbon with great ceremony accompanied him to the King's room and then withdrew. Oliver followed him and closed the door.

Louis welcomed the Duke with a friendly smile. Negligently leaning back in his chair, he stretched out a hand to him and offered him a stool at his side. The Duke, who did not know whether the King wished to pursue the infernal and demoniacal formalities of his Chamberlain, waited in gloomy silence for the other to open the conversation. But Louis took his time, until he saw by the nervous twitching of the Duke's hands that he was a prey to anxiety and uncertainty.

"Let us lay our cards on the table, cousin," he observed in altered tones. "This will be to your advantage, not mine; for I know your cards already."

The Duke was silent. Louis, whose seat was a little higher than his visitor's, leant over towards him across the arm of his chair.

"When I came here, Burgundy, I was already aware of the well-spun web in which I was to be caught. I could have drawn every corner of it for you, ay, every mesh and strand, some of which you yourself knew nothing of or will learn for the first time to-night. I wished that when the time came, the web should be torn down not only by me but also by you, for you too would already have been entangled in it. But the decisive moment came more suddenly and dramatically than I had expected. Yet this is to both your advantage and mine. I came here in order to promise to be your friend; thanks to Liége I can prove to you that I am your friend. My three hundred Scottish Archers and my five thousand horsemen, whom the Grand Master will have marched here meanwhile from St. Quentin, are at your disposal."

"We shall start off to-morrow," said the Duke simply. Louis laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You have conquered yourself, my friend," he said. "I should like to thank you without referring to the past. I will gladly grant all that you hope to obtain by force. Brittany is no longer of any interest to you, but let your other friends bear

in mind that, without having had the need to rebel of late, my beloved brother, Duke Charles of France, will be given Champagne and Brie. Moreover, if you seriously desire it, I give my consent for his marriage to your daughter Maria — permission which I have, I confess, hitherto withheld for pedagogic reasons, so to speak, because he was too young and had caused me much vexation."

"I have not by any means reached a decision on that matter," said the Duke with some embarrassment, "but I thank you for the promise."

"Nemours will be granted certain lands," the King continued affably, "and as for yourself, I will make peace on the basis of the last treaty of Paris. Are you satisfied?"

"I am satisfied," replied Burgundy at last in low tones.

"To my bother-in-law of Savoy I offer reconciliation and friendship. I have already requested my allies of Milan to cease hostilities against him. Du Lau I will reinstate with a lieutenancy in the south. — Is there any other reparation you would have me make to the gentlemen of my escort of honour?"

"No."

"And one thing more," Louis whispered. "They have played a double game with us. I know and you suspect — whom? I shall deal with Balue myself. Will you see to it that he does not cling to the tail of your coat?"

"Yes," said Burgundy.

"The Constable is to a certain extent at least answerable for the catastrophe at Liège. He ought to have prevented von Wildt from joining the townsfolk. Shall I hand him over to you, cousin?"

"No," the Duke replied after a moment's reflection.

Louis leant over and whispered in his ear:

"Do you want his head?"

"No."

The King screwed his lips into a hideous grimace.

"Well then, at the propitious moment — I shall."

About eight o'clock, in the presence of the Burgundian Court and the King's suite, the peace was solemnly sworn on the holy cross of Charlemagne, which the Valois always bore with him. The bells pealed.

DURING the last night in Péronne, when the King and Oliver were already at rest and the room was filled with peaceful darkness — the air seemed fresher too, as if the walls had grown thinner — Necker, just as he was about to fall asleep, heard a voice:

“I have not touched Anne, my Oliver. . . .”

The violent beating of his heart made Necker spring up. Panting and open-mouthed he listened. After a little while the King repeated:

“I have not touched Anne, my Oliver.”

Necker’s panting increased in violence, as though his breast could no longer contain the secrets it held. He knelt up in bed and groaned:

“Sire, forgive me, I have. . . .”

“I forgive you, my Oliver, because I guess and have long guessed all there is to be forgiven. I forgive you your evil thoughts, for the sake of the great and noble deed you have done in overcoming yourself and loving me. But, brother, my bad side does not forgive me for the good deed wherewith I have repaid your evil thought.”

He was silent. Necker slipped from his couch and groped his way towards him. He kissed his hands. Gently the King said:

“We now know each other to the very depth, my brother.”

In the Abbey of St. Denis, near Paris — whither the Saint had carried his head after it had been cut off, and where he wished to be buried — at command of the King, who had set out for Liége with the Duke, a high mass was sung three days later and a solemn *Te Deum* to celebrate the peace. And all the bells of the city, all the bells of the land, were set a-ringing.

BOOK TWO

Chapter I

ALTER EGO

AT the beginning of November, the undisciplined soldiers, exasperated by the stubborn resistance and their own heavy losses, were still engaged in murder and pillage in the conquered city. The Duke's Limburger troops were methodically setting it on fire for the third time, and the swollen corpses of the drowned, mingling with the floating ice on the Meuse, were being carried down stream like ghastly flotsam, while the Burgundian cavalry with their lances were massacring the rest of the inhabitants — men, women and children — who had fled to the hills. The King, together with his suite and his troops had left Liége. His cousin Charles accompanied him as far as Huy, but Crèveœur, the Chancellor, remained with him until the frontier was reached.

When marching on the town and throughout the siege Louis had been careful to avoid anything in the nature of a parley with the enemy. To escape being compromised by any statement the leader of the lanceknights might make, he displayed a ruthlessness which pleased the Duke very much, and he persisted in this attitude even when his Constable and the Bishop could have handed the man over alive into his hands. Outside the walls of Liége the King offered his Scottish Archers a large sum for Wildt's head, and organised a body of sharpshooters, whose one object was to put an end to the man. In the course of a terrific sally on the part of the lanceknights, which cost the assailants six hundred lives, Wildt fell mortally wounded, and his mercenaries, whose retreat was cut off by a picked body of troops led by the Duke in person, were annihilated. At last the town was stormed, and the King forbade any prisoners to be taken.

Necker, who was constantly at the King's side, and was always the first to hear the result of his meditations, marvelled at the skill and energy with which he flung his net over his enemies, both open and secret, and in the end succeeded in

leading the whole body of those who represented a will opposed to his own, like a clumsy tame bear at his heels.

The only man who managed to slip safely and quietly out of the meshes of the King's irresistible power, was, strange to say, the Constable. In Cambrai, which was the first halting place on the march to Liège, three of his best regiments unostentatiously joined the Franco-Burgundian army, and he naturally commanded them throughout the siege, just as the Grand Bastard, Philip of Savoy, the Poncet de Rivière commanded their own contingents. By the time the King marched off, these troops had proved themselves to be in every way at least equal to the soldiers of the French army. And thus it came about that Louis and St. Pol, both wreathed in smiles, took friendly leave of each other on the banks of the Aisne, which marked the limit of the Constable's jurisdiction.

The Cardinal was less fortunate. He could not understand why the King was apparently gracious once more. Ever since the departure from Péronne, Louis not only had refrained from all captiousness but had also displayed his old friendliness towards him; and as he was openly snubbed by the Duke, he did not even dare to express his desire to remain in Burgundy. His attempt with the help of Pierre d'Urfé to join the Court of Charles of France also miscarried, for not only did the King through Oliver warn his brother's representative against the ruse, but that astute individual was by no means anxious to jeopardise the important advantages which had been so easily won for his master. Louis also defeated Balue's attempt to flee to the Constable, by means of the simple expedient of always keeping him at his side, and arranging that his Scottish Archers should always be placed between the Cardinal and the Constable's men. Was the Constable ready to conduct Balue to safety? Was he too perhaps deceived by the King's consistent courtesy to his minister? — Possibly he was disinclined to provoke the King and compromise his own position by helping his fellow-conspirator? Even Oliver was unable to answer these questions. But, when Count St. Pol came to take leave of the smiling King, Lord Milford, who was in command of the Scottish Archers, had instructions to stand close behind the Cardinal and shoot him if he attempted to escape. But Balue, whom the exciting times through which he had passed seemed to have

made a little thinner, sat calm and majestic on his white palfrey, and merely exchanged a formal though friendly farewell with the Constable.

That very night, however, at the King's headquarters in Laon, after the Cardinal had bidden good-night to his smiling master and had repaired to his own room, he heard the three distinct knocks on his door with which the representatives of justice usually demanded admission, and Tristan's soft voice said:

"In the name of the King!"

His face white and his left hand clasping a crucifix, Balue opened the door. The Provost Marshal entered, calm, grave and courteous, bearing a parchment scroll sealed with the royal seal. He went up to the prelate, touched his sleeve lightly with the roll, and said gently.

"Monsignor Jean Balue, Cardinal Bishop of Angers, your supreme Eminence, in the name of the King, I make you my prisoner!"

TRISTAN L'HERMITE spent the night with two of his men in Balue's room, and the next day, when he started off with the Cardinal, who, though silent, showed no signs of weakness, the King, with a small retinue and accompanied by some of the troops, had already left the town. The strong escort which had remained behind were, for purposes of security, divided into two sections, one of which marched in front and the other in the rear of the prisoner and the Provost Marshal, and it was noticed that the latter maintained a courteous silence.

"All those lances to guard one priest?" Balue enquired mockingly, between thin-drawn lips.

Provost Tristan gave a faint smile.

"All the more reason for the politician to feel flattered," he replied politely.

The King remained in Compiègne and dismissed his brother-in-law, the Duke of Bourbon, and the Grand Master, who had not dared to make enquiries about the Cardinal. Louis said nothing about Balue's arrest; Oliver and Jean de Beaune alone knew what the Provost's orders were. He also prevented any of his officials from having access to the prisoner, not so

much from any sense of delicacy, but because he was a psychologist. He cared little whether they condemned his treacherous proceedings, but only wished to spare those who were useful and necessary to him the depression with which the sight of a fate apparently so arbitrary and unexpected might fill them. Thus Balue was brought to Compiègne by night and locked up in a room in the castle tower, and it was only on the following night that the door of this room was opened to admit the King, followed by Provost Tristan and Oliver.

The Cardinal was kneeling on a small *prie-dieu* in front of an ebony crucifix, and did not interrupt his orisons. Louis and his attendants waited in silence on the threshold and removed their hats. Balue made the sign of the cross, said Amen, and rose.

"Amen," repeated the King, and, crossing himself, put on his felt hat, the brim of which was adorned with images of saints.

"Amen," echoed Provost Tristan, and Oliver's lips also moved as he too crossed himself.

The Cardinal bowed gravely to the King, and silently offered him the only chair in the bare room. Louis sat down, looked thoughtfully in front of him for a moment, and then turned his eyes sternly up at Balue, who stood erect before him.

"I do regard you as a traitor," Louis began in a calm voice, deliberately recalling the question which, on the night of the fête of St. Denis, Balue had uttered in tones of such deep despair. He raised his hand quickly when he thought he saw a look of hope in the Cardinal's face. "I know it, Balue."

The prelate stared at him without moving a muscle or showing a sign of fear. The King continued:

"You do not contest the fact, Balue, you make no attempt to defend yourself?"

"Sire," replied the Cardinal firmly, "I have come to the end of my life."

Louis bowed his head slightly and seemed to be reflecting. Then he said:

"If I do not yet choose to read guilt in your reply, Balue; if I am inclined to doubt my knowledge, if I bid you recall that first night in Péronne, when you came to me and warned me

about the Duke's intentions, and if I now ask you for the third time — did you know it . . .”

He stood up and, stretching out his hand, touched the gold cross on the Cardinal's breast.

“If by the Cross of our Lord, I ask you, did you know it, what will you answer me, Balue?”

The Cardinal raised the cross to his lips and kissed it and then in loud clear tones replied:

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shed His Blood for us, I reply — *Pater, peccavi*, I knew it!”

There was a moment's tense silence. The King passed a hand thoughtfully across his brow and, with his eyes on the ground, resumed his seat. Oliver bit his lip.

“Balue,” Louis continued very quietly after a while, “you were not the only one to know it?”

“I was not the only one to know it.”

“My brother, Charles of France, knew it, Nemours knew it, the Constable knew it. . . .”

For the first time during the interview the Cardinal, without any sign of hatred, but calmly and coldly, glanced over the shoulder of the speaker at Necker.

“. . . And my faithful servant, Oliver,” the King concluded.

The Cardinal made no reply. Louis observed him intently. Oliver grew more and more agitated. The King began to speak again, and his words, uttered ever more softly and slowly, were a terrible torture for the souls that listened.

“Your silence amounts to an affirmative, Balue. I can well understand that you should have nothing more to say concerning the first three names. But that you should remain silent about the name of him who now stands behind us is a proof either of your great intelligence or of your complete resignation. Are you holding your peace deliberately, or only because you are tired, Balue?”

The Cardinal made a gesture of pain and answered with some hesitation:

“Because I know that the Master acted as your faithful servant and in accordance with his duty.”

“When did you first begin to feel suspicious of him?”

“In Péronne.”

"Are you not astonished now that he allowed me to go to Péronne?"

"No, Sire, for you already knew the outlines of the plot, and how to meet it."

The King was silent for a moment. Oliver felt his knees give way beneath him, and he closed his eyes under Balue's gaze; for the Cardinal continued to stare at him while he made his replies.

"Can you," Louis continued softly and mercilessly, "do you realise now, Balue — you who are able to see through men, and are now aware that Oliver acted according to my instructions — that he was playing a part both in word and deed even as early as your departure from Amboise? Or do you not realise this?"

Once more the Cardinal's eyes sought Necker's. But the latter was more perturbed than the prisoner by this strange inquisition; and suddenly overcome by a fresh feeling of guilt, which almost choked him, he looked feverishly round and, forgetting where he stood, groaned before Balue could reply:

"No!"

The King did not stir: he seemed not to have heard. Balue, as though he felt cold, pressed his arms against his body, and raising his head, said more loudly than Oliver:

"Yes."

Louis nodded.

"In order to reach the absolute certainty which I regard as necessary and vital in this matter," he continued in his cruelly soft voice, "I should like to repeat the question in a different form. If you look back to the time when you left Amboise, could you not even now declare that certain of the words or deeds of the Master were genuine and sincere, I mean that for a short space of time they were not altogether due to the fact that he was playing a part or pretending?"

"Yes," interposed Oliver hastily. He was beside himself, and his lips hardly moved as he uttered the word.

"No!" cried the Cardinal loudly and firmly.

The King rose to his feet and his face was solemn and serious as that of a judge.

"Your Eminence," he said in a clear voice, "you have done well not to heed the promptings of the Evil One. Your

‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ have saved your head, which otherwise would have been forfeited like the heads of the three gentlemen we have mentioned. You know best whether your answers were more cautious than Christian. In our opinion they were both; for had you accused the man who has saved the King for his country, the King would have been obliged to kill both his conscience and the accuser — the only man in a position to accuse. Moreover the Christian tone of your answers has restored to us our respect for your sacred person. As an injured monarch, we are bound, Cardinal Balue, to render you harmless. But we shall not achieve this end by commanding your death, either secret or public, as we have done in the case of the three others. Yet, without injuring a hair of your head, we shall, after our own manner, consign you to *oblivion*.”

The priest’s thick-set body quivered, and his shoulders shook. For a moment it seemed as if his hands were clutching at the air for support, as if he were about to collapse. Oliver sprang to his side. But in a moment he was firm and composed again, and, standing with his legs apart, he seized the cross from his breast and held it towards the Master:

“*Apage Satana!*” he cried.

Necker retreated, his face distraught. A smile seemed to hover for a moment on Louis’ lips. Then he turned to Provost Tristan:

“Provost Marshal of France, we bid you in our name to put Jean Balue, Cardinal Bishop of Angers, on trial for high treason and lèse majesté. We will in due course give you the names of those who will compose the court.”

The Cardinal fell on his knees on the *prie-dieu* and in a firm voice exclaimed:

“*Solve vincla reis, profer lumen cæcis!*”

Whereupon he continued his prayers in silence. The King took off his hat.

“Amen,” said the priest at last.

“Amen,” said the King and Provost Tristan together.

Oliver was silent.

THE King had intended returning to Touraine on the following day without passing through Paris. Events in Péronne and Liége had been of such a nature that they made triumphal

celebrations, if not ridiculous, at least dangerous. Moreover, Louis had always disliked public receptions, processions and parades. Finally, Balue's arrest at such a moment provided a further reason for avoiding the sharp, suspicious eyes of the capital.

When the King, before his examination of the Cardinal, had communicated his decision to his confidential ministers, and noticed the joy in Necker's eyes, he hastily and with some confusion suppressed what he had intended to add. The startling nature of his questions and their tragic effect upon Oliver, during the scene with Balue, had been deliberately planned and expected, and when he returned to his room he was looking gravely but without surprise at his Chamberlain, when the latter, still much shaken, said:

"Your Majesty must surely have work for me in Paris?"

"Yes," Louis replied in calm and friendly tones. Then turning to the Provost, he added: "You, my friend, will be responsible for Balue's person, and see that he is relegated to the oubliettes. You, Oliver, will go to Paris, to arrange for the judicial proceedings in Parliament and the confiscation of Balue's property. You will hand the Parliamentary Councillors selected for the judicial commission their mandate in my name and explain to them the line of procedure and the kind of verdict I expect of them. After that you will await Tristan's arrival in Paris, when you can return to Amboise."

The King and Necker were alone at the time.

"Do I owe you an explanation?" the King enquired.

"No," Oliver replied in low tones; "but you must know, Sire, that the two words I shouted at the Cardinal were quite uncalled for and unpremeditated. . . . You know that I had no intention of luring him to his death through them."

"I know," said the King, deeply moved, "that you are my own better half, brother."

And he kissed Necker on both cheeks.

Oliver accompanied the King as far as Meaux. On the journey they discussed nothing except Necker's mission to Paris and other political matters. Neither Louis nor the Master seemed to have time for private matters behind their business-like concern with public affairs. But when Oliver took his leave, in order to proceed to the capital with Daniel Bart and a few

attendants, and his anguish suddenly shone in his eyes like a dim light, the King grasped his hand and held it firmly.

"Do you wish to come with me, my friend?" he enquired, hardly moving his lips. "Shall I once more resume my struggle with myself?"

Necker shook his head.

"You would have to enter upon a fresh struggle, Sire," he replied in hollow tones, "and that I have no right to expect."

The King turned away his eyes and then said thoughtfully:

"Since we belong to each other, we ought surely to share the guilt."

"Yes," replied Necker.

"Then it would no longer be hard for me to know that you were my own better half, brother."

Oliver looked into his eyes.

"Let the better half be for you and the worse half for me — and the whole be conscience," was his bold but enigmatic reply.

The King was silent; then he said very gravely:

"God have mercy on our souls, brother. Farewell!"

Necker kissed his hands, and set out that same hour, following the course of the Marne. The King took the road through Melun and Orleans to Touraine.

On the evening after his arrival in Amboise, Jean de Beaune went to Anne, and the good cheer in his warm and friendly countenance banished her first feelings of anxiety. He hastened to tell her that the Master was in excellent health, that the King was very pleased with him, and, if such a thing were possible, held him in higher affection and esteem than ever. For the moment he was engaged on an honourable mission in Paris, but would return shortly; meanwhile he had sent her a little love-token. With a courtly gesture he handed her a little pig-skin case. She smiled at him and said simply:

"Thank you, sir; I am delighted."

The courtier gave a little bow and raised his brows significantly.

"There is somebody else who is delighted too, Madam. . . ."

In her agitation at these words, Anne's fingers must accidentally have touched a catch in the case, for the cover flew

open, and a small piece of folded parchment fell to the ground. Anne saw that the case contained a string of valuable pearls, intended to be twined Florentine fashion in the hair. Jean de Beaune picked up the note and handed it to her with a smile. With a quick movement she laid the jewel case on the table and, turning away, unfolded the piece of parchment. It contained only the following hurried message in Oliver's handwriting: "He is the Lord, Anne, and he is I." She let it drop, and once again turned her face to her visitor — it was pale and set. Jean de Beaune said softly:

"The King expects you, madam."

"Yes," said Anne, more softly still; and then she added very slowly, "I — am delighted."

An hour later, in the chamber of love in the tower, with which she was already familiar, she threw aside the veil which had concealed her face on her way through the silent galleries and apartments and past the sentries and attendants; and once again Jean de Beaune smiled at her discreetly, bowed and vanished through the opening of the arras.

Anne was dressed in the same gown of smooth light-coloured velvet which she had worn on the evening of Oliver's departure, and the pearls were wound in her hair. Once again the room was full of the fragrance of civet and myrrh, and the silver light of the hanging lamps shimmered in the ceiling mirror, on the dull gold brocade of the walls, over the delicate tinted rugs, and the leather-covered floor. Once again the broad low bed, strewn with blue fox skins stood temptingly arrayed. But Anne remained standing close to the wall, her body quite stiff, her head leaning against the silken hangings, staring anxiously and bewildered about the circular chamber. She tried with all the hidden power of her will to recover the mood which had been hers in this very place, to feel again that same bold bodily readiness. But she failed; her spirit was no longer able to find Necker's spirit; her thoughts fluttered in and out of the room and tried to find support in him, but they found him not. It was then that she understood the full significance of his hastily scribbled note, and she wept to think that she was alone. She made neither sound nor movement as she wept: the tears welled slowly from her wide open eyes, and rolled down her waxen cheeks.

Once more she heard the sound of the panel door being thrust aside, and of quick steps ascending the stairs. But her heart beat no faster, she did not stir from the wall, her mouth was unable to smile, and her hands did not rise to wipe the tears from her face.

Louis entered the room at a point so close to her that he brushed her dress as he came in, and uttered an exclamation of surprise or fear. Then turning quickly to her, he took her head in his hands, and gently forced her to look into his eyes. She searched them with a strange questioning look, and her pupils grew large and dim.

"Oliver. . ." she groaned at last, raising her voice a little, as if she were calling his name for the second time.

The King slowly drew her head towards his, and kissed her on the mouth.

"Anne," he murmured, embracing her, "I too am Oliver."

He drew her gently down on to the bed. As she threw back her head, she again saw herself for a moment in the ceiling mirror, and all the soft smooth skin of her outstretched form and the dim outlines of her face. Then a heavy shadow fell upon her.

WHEN, a few days later, Necker, on his way back from Paris, saw the sinister silhouette of the castle beneath the grey November sky, he thought of the summer evening on which he and Anne had seen this view for the first time, and recalled Anne's exclamation of fear. Suddenly he shivered as though he were cold, and accordingly turned into a little village inn with Daniel Bart and his men and drank heavily. He did not hurry himself, but, resting his elbows on the heavy table, buried his face in his hands.

"Your hair is already growing grey, Master," observed Daniel, who had been gazing at the silent figure.

"Yes, yes," said Oliver, nodding, "I feel as if I were already over fifty," and looking at his companion with a sad expression, he added, "as if I were as old as the King."

They were both silent and Oliver continued to drink.

"Listen, my good Daniel," he said at last, resting his chin on the back of his hand, "just have a good look at me. Have I not already grown something like the King?"

Bart was obviously confused and at a loss for the proper reply. Moreover, knowing that the Master was drunk, he supposed he was merely fishing for compliments. He also recalled his extraordinary behaviour in Paris, where, contrary to his wont, he had spent every night in low company and had drunk himself silly. Was it possible that success, royal favour and the triumph of his secret power had gone to his head? Daniel no longer understood him.

"Perhaps, Master," he replied, with some embarrassment, "perhaps about the eyes and brow . . . and certainly as regards the mind. . . ."

"But what about this, my friend," said Oliver, imitating Louis' resonant voice to perfection, screwing up his lips, pressing his bony nose with his fingers, and raising his eyebrows, just as the King was wont to do.

"My God, Master!" stammered Bart, leaning forward in horror, "be careful; we are not alone!"

"Rubbish!" scoffed Oliver and set to drinking again.

The night was already far spent when Oliver and his followers passed through the gate of Amboise, and once again he halted at a hostelry, inside the walls of the town. He did not send the servants to the castle with the horses, but bade them spend the night in a barrack, whereupon, followed by the astonished Daniel, he went to the empty tap-room.

"Master," said Bart, plucking up courage, "we can get wine at the castle, and you have not seen Mistress Necker for many weeks."

Oliver, who had already taken a seat, did not seem to have heard the protest and, thumping the table with his fist, ordered a flagon of the best Graves and some food. He then sat eating and drinking without saying a word, while Daniel anxiously watched his grey and taciturn features.

"Have you given up the idea of going to the castle to-night?" he enquired at last.

"I don't know yet," Oliver replied shortly, and sank once more into a state of complete apathy.

"The King will certainly have given up expecting you to-day," observed Bart, who was feeling tired. Necker became attentive. A sudden thought seemed to have struck him and an unhappy drunken smile hovered round his lips.

"Yes, yes," he chuckled, "the King will have given up expecting me. As if I did not know that! — But don't you see, Daniel," he added in a low voice, as if he were telling him a secret, "I am the Devil, and the Devil is in the King? So I might have said: I, in the King, have given up expecting myself, *le Mauvais*, to-day? Do you understand? Do you understand?"

His eyes were bright and feverish, as he leant across the table and clutched the man's wrist.

"Do you understand, Daniel?"

Bart, a prey to secret qualms, exclaimed involuntarily:

"Master, you are drunk!"

Leaning still further forward, Oliver shook him by the shoulders.

"O thou imbecile!" he cried, in a voice which his extreme excitement rendered falsetto. "How you torment me, you of little faith! For that is the whole point! If I am drunk here, I may also be drunk in the King himself — And perhaps. . ."

Standing almost erect now, he flung himself on Daniel's neck and whispered in his ear:

"And perhaps I am lying by Anne's side now, Daniel. Perhaps I ought not to disturb myself just now!"

"In the name of all the saints, Master," cried Bart, pale with horror and trying to extricate himself from Oliver's grasp. "You are raving! God has marked you out to strike you down. Master, I must pray for you. Let me pray for you!"

But Oliver held him so tightly that the giant could not shake himself free.

"No, Daniel!" he cried in agony, "no, do not pray for me. God will not strike me down in that way. Try to understand! Try to help me! Try to believe me!"

There was so much misery in his appeal that despite his coarse and brutal nature Daniel was deeply affected and softened.

"Yes, my Master," he said almost tenderly. "I understand you."

Oliver released him and sank back exhausted into his chair. His arms remained loosely stretched across the table and his head fell forward. Thus he remained for a long while without uttering a sound. Daniel began to think he had fallen asleep,

and was on the point of getting up to arrange about quarters for the night, when Necker's fingers groped for the tankard and grasped it. Bart sat down again. Oliver opened his eyes, raised the tankard to his lips, and quaffed its contents at one gulp.

"No, Daniel," he said calmly and deliberately, "I will disturb them after all."

He stood up, flung a piece of gold on the table, and left the inn with a quick and certain step. Bart kept close behind him, for he expected that as soon as Oliver met the cold night air he would stagger and fall on the steep incline of the street. But Oliver seemed quite sober and, walking quickly with short firm steps over the hard frozen ground, was quite certain of his way. He looked to neither left nor right at the sleeping houses, but without the slightest hesitation selected the shortest and most difficult cuts up the castle rock, which, on account of the various contrivances for defence that lay concealed about, were dangerous for any but those who were sure of foot and familiar with the ground. He addressed no word to his companion, but merely repeated in a hoarse voice "*Le Mauvais!*" and again "*Le Mauvais!*" whenever the clash of steel and a shadow indicated that a sentry barred his way. The evil-sounding words threw open all paths, gates and doors before him.

Hastening along ever faster and faster, he sprang up the last few steps and ran along the remaining galleries in the direction of his own apartments; and on reaching them, bade his panting attendant, with a brief good-night, go to his own room. Then, his heart beating wildly, he came to a standstill at the door of the bedroom. Noisily kicking off his heavy riding-boots, he wiped the sweat from his brow, and tried above the roar of the blood in his ears, and his heavy panting breath, to catch any sound inside the room. But all he heard was the thunder of his own heart and lungs. Then he coughed, moved the chairs about, threw his baggage hither and thither, and let his weapons fall clashing to the floor, but there was no sound in response. Whereupon he called out ever louder and louder:

"Anne! Anne! Anne!"

He shouted.

"Anne!"

Nothing stirred. With a tortured smile he snatched a wax torch from the wall and opened the door. Still smiling he en-

tered the bedroom. His wife's bed was empty; it had not been touched. One or two articles of clothing lay about. Before the mirror stood the box of cosmetics and the silver phials, all in great disorder, with stoppers removed, as if they had just been used. The room smelt of ambergris, musk, and almonds. Oliver inhaled the familiar, homely scents, stroked the linen of the pillows, as if he were touching Anne's face and gazed upon her untouched bed, smiling the while.

Then he left the room and, torch in hand, passed swiftly through the adjoining apartments, gliding ghostlike behind the flickering glare, through passages and galleries, up and down stairs, and past dumb and weary sentries, who hastily saluted the King's confidential minister. At last he reached the guard-room of the Scottish Archers, who kept sentinel over the King's private apartments, and whose officer, drunk with sleep, sprang from his plank bed, and with dutiful zeal, though heavy tongue, reported:

"His Majesty is still at work."

Necker nodded and hastened to the turret room, which was brilliantly lighted. On the door he knocked the secret knock which he alone was allowed to use — one heavy rap and two shorter ones — and repeated the summons thrice. But no one answered. The door was locked. He opened it with his night-key. The room was empty, and the panel door leading to the staircase was drawn aside. From the chamber above came the sound of hollow muffled laughter.

Silently and on tip-toe, Oliver crept up the secret stair, moving slowly forward step by step. Before long he was standing behind the panel door. He heard Louis' careless drunken words, and Anne's voice tenderly whispering. He heard the panting movements of their bodies — he heard the King gasp — he heard her faint cry:

"Oliver . . . Oliver . . ."

He pressed his face against the door, stretching his arms left and right along the circular walls, and buried his teeth in the hangings with which they were covered. Thus he remained throughout the spell of exhaustion that followed within, until once again came the sound of whispering and drinking, and a repetition of compliments, gross words and gestures, and fresh paroxysms of passion. Then he tore himself away and, standing

stiff, his legs apart, and lips tight pressed, he rapped at the door — the three secret taps, which he alone might use — one long and loud and two shorter ones; three times he repeated them, and they sounded dull through the cloth and the wood.

Inside there was a stillness as of death. Minute after minute passed by. At last Louis' voice, hoarse and barely recognisable, was heard:

"Oliver!"

Necker did not answer, but ran noisily downstairs. He could just hear that Anne was weeping.

In the room below he seated himself in the King's high-backed chair, before the King's vast table. With his hands clasping the lions' heads carved on the arms of the chair, he waited. Now, for the first time, he felt that he was drunk, for the circular room seemed to be turning ever faster and faster about him as he sat in the centre. Or was it not drunkenness? Was it the intoxicating sensation of being King? He waited with a haughty look on his face.

He heard the door above being drawn aside; heavy footsteps lurched down the stairs, and Louis, scantily clad, stumbled into the room, his face bloated, his eyes hollow. He grasped the table and stood there. Oliver made no attempt to rise.

"Have I disturbed you, brother?" he asked the King, looking firmly into his eyes.

"Oliver . . ." stammered Louis, and pressed a hand to his brow. Necker smiled an evil smile.

"Who is Oliver? Where is Oliver?"

"Here is Oliver!" cried the King, thumping his own breast.

Necker raised an eyebrow, and in Louis' sonorous voice replied:

"Then return to Mistress Necker, brother. I will not keep you any longer."

Louis pressed his fingers to his temples and shook his head.

"No, no, I cannot now!" he muttered. "I cannot now. God have mercy on our soul, brother!"

"Who cannot now?" cried Necker, in a loud voice, standing up. "Who is King?"

Louis staggered back, as if he had been struck a heavy blow. But in a moment he recovered himself.

"I am King," he said softly, as if he were ashamed.

"And I, Sire?" Oliver enquired humbly.

"Thou, brother? Thou art my conscience."

He turned away suddenly, with a gesture of embarrassment, as if he had only just realised that he was undressed. Oliver fetched his long, fur-lined cloak, and set it about his shoulders.

"Sire," he muttered, "Oliver was drunk, and the King is weary."

"Yes," said Louis, and he shivered with the cold. Oliver opened the door of the turret chamber for him, followed him into the passage connecting the tower with the living apartments, and was about to follow him to his bedroom when the King, with a friendly smile, dismissed him.

"Return to Mistress Necker, Oliver, I will not keep you any longer. Good-night, my friend."

Necker bowed.

"Good-night, your Majesty."

The King, leaning slightly forward, and wrapped in the cloak, turned with unsteady steps in the direction of his own room. Oliver returned to the turret chamber, closed the door, and climbed up the winding stair. Then, with his usual rapidity of movement, he glided into the tent-like alcove, like a man who, after a short absence, is returning to the domestic hearth. Anne was lying, a shimmering white figure, among the dark skins; her eyes were wide open, her face pale as wax.

"Oliver. . . !" she gasped.

"Let us go to sleep now, Anne," said Necker, and kissed her on the brow. "The King will not disturb me again to-day. He is asleep, too."

Chapter 2

THE CAGE

NO one at Court, not even the King, was able to discover any change in Oliver's attitude to Anne, although it soon became known to others besides the most discreet members of the royal household that the fair lady was Louis' favorite. The Master, who about this time was ennobled and made one of the King's ministers, continued to treat his wife with his usual kindness, and exercised an apparent tolerance, which did not fail to excite ridicule, although in those days men were not slow to appreciate motives. Daniel Bart alone was aware that, on the rare occasions when his master spent the night in his own quarters, he and Anne slept apart. Daniel Bart alone knew that Necker's hard features no longer softened or grew sunny when he looked at his wife, and that Anne had lost her bewitching smile. What he failed to note, however, was that day by day Anne grew ever more cold and fireless, and even more estranged both from life and from herself.

And yet, after that terrible night of drunken debauch, no words had passed between them, no reproaches and no threats. The cruel reality of the morrow had been neither alleviated nor aggravated by question or answer. As for Oliver, the one outburst of feeling on that night had been his first and his last, and he had already almost forgotten how far he had intended it merely to impress the King. Just as on the high road to Amboise, and in the intervals between his Paris dissipations, he had recognised there was but one way of reconciling his physical life with his ultimate spiritual surrender to the King, without being choked by his loathing of his own body, so, after awaking from that dreadful night, he found himself completely adapted to the new conditions. He was turned to stone, and was therefore no longer moved by his own fate — or even by the terrible sentence upon Anne which, owing to his renunciation of everything human, he had passed and brutally executed. The hidden, god-like, and unconquerable energy of his conscience already

belonged to the King, and already exercised such power that Louis did not sleep off the memory of that demoniacal and disorderly night as easily as he did his drunkenness. For many a day afterwards he did not dare to mention the name of Necker's wife, until one evening he found her in his tent-like alcove, passionate, her eyes feverish, her lips babbling of love.

Whether the deep attachment which gradually came to lay a faster hold upon the aging monarch than the very power of his lust, and which riveted him to Anne, arose from the strange conscience within and about him which from that moment began to direct his life, or whether it was but the passion of a man beginning to grow old, Oliver himself was unable to say; nor did he dare to think about it lest his answer to the question might stir even his cold heart, and revive his personal feelings. As it seemed impossible for the two men's common development to be furthered by using Anne as an intermediary, or as a means towards the attainment of any object of private ambition or of political import as, moreover, the King soon forgot the tragic road to his love in the gratification of that love itself, and Necker had advanced far enough along the road to have no further need of forgetfulness, he was able to regard the newly-awakened emotions of his royal master with the same callousness as his own dead feelings. But by the world about him his attitude was interpreted as courtly discretion, and was regarded as at once heroic, devilish and ludicrous.

But in the whirl and clamour of the political game, and of the applause which the King was pleased publicly to vouchsafe to Necker for his ability, the scandal about the King's illicit love gradually sank into oblivion. People realised that behind Louis' loud eulogies and the concrete proofs of his favour there lay a much more deeply-rooted sympathy than his interest in a useful and designing woman and a tolerant husband could warrant. The reports of what had happened in Péronne, which were accentuated by the fall of the mighty Cardinal, increased the general respect for the King's unconquerable power and Necker's demoniacal wiles. People feared the former because they knew him, and the latter because he could not be known. Balue's trial, which was terrible in its swiftness and secrecy, was conducted before Provost Tristan, who was President of the Court, and two lay and two ecclesiastical dignitaries — the Parliamentary

President and three members of Parliament — and was held in a room of the castle, which was specially set apart and heavily guarded. The findings of the tribunal so greatly increased the dread with which the Court regarded Oliver that the feeling became almost superstitious. Whereas hitherto, in sceptical imitation of the King, they had called him "Devil," people were now only too ready to cross themselves when they mentioned him. And this effect of his personality, together with his smooth manner and his close association with the King, who regarded his judgment as indispensable in all political and administrative matters, made any attempt at a conflict or intrigue with him vain and abortive. Thus, in his inaccessible position, which was felt rather than imposed — for he was always friendly and ready to listen and to answer any question — he saw every day in the obsequiousness of the courtiers the loyalty and humility they were careful to show in his presence.

As soon as Provost Tristan pronounced the sentence of the Court — that the Cardinal was to be imprisoned for life in a fortress, but that no chains or fetters were to touch his sacred person — the prisoner was led from the hall of justice, not to one of the cells in the oubliettes, but to a large, dimly-lighted, vaulted chamber in an upper storey, in the middle of which stood a cage. This construction was barely high enough for a man to stand up in, five feet long and five feet broad, and its limited capacity was further encumbered by a plank bed, a table and a chair. The men of the escort declared that, when he saw it, the Cardinal uttered such a piercing shriek that the walls re-echoed, and sank on his knees and prayed aloud. After this he pulled himself together, and walked with firm steps into the cage. The officer in charge of the escort also reported that the prisoner was so tall that he knocked his head against the top of the cage, and if he wished to stand would have to keep his head bowed. The King, who had not imposed this life sentence of torture for the first time, shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Then he must grow shorter."

But as he said the words he did not look at Necker, whose eyes he knew were upon him. And he gave orders for the workmen, who that night were to weld the door of the cage so that it could not be opened, and leave only a small movable grating for the admission of food, to bend the top bar up a little.

One day soon afterwards, Oliver paid a visit to the lofty vault. It struck damp and cold as he entered. Melted snow was trickling in from one of the windows in the roof, through which a grey light filtered into the room. The walls were dank with moisture. Balue was walking restlessly to and fro in the cage, wrapped in his woollen blankets, with the collar of his cassock drawn over his head. He looked like a fat old woman. He took no notice of the Master, who, after examining the walls and the dilapidated fireplace, and casting a rapid glance at the prisoner, quickly departed. Soon workmen arrived with scuttles of coal, firewood, and materials for mending the walls and windows. The gaoler also entered and, without saying a word, pushed a long cloak of sheep's wool through the iron bars. Steps were taken to dry the room and repair the fireplace, to instal properly closing windows, to cover the floor with straw-matting, and protect the walls with high cloth screens, which could be drawn close to the cage at night. The food, which at first had been the same as the prison fare supplied during the trial, now became good and plentiful, while every evening Daniel Bart appeared with a flagon of excellent wine.

Soon afterwards Oliver came again, followed by Bart and two servants, bearing folio volumes, parchment, writing materials and tapers. He examined the walls, the windows, and the fireplace, in which a large fire was burning. The air was warm and dry. Then only did he turn to the Cardinal, who on this occasion had not taken his eyes off him.

"Have you any complaints to make, your Eminence?" he enquired. Balue shook his head.

"I only regret that the King does not allow me to die."

Necker appeared not to notice the deep despair of his reply, and proceeded cheerfully:

"It is the King's wish that your grievous lot should be made as light as possible. And as he is anxious to provide not only for the needs of your body, but also for the entertainment of your mind, he makes the following proposal, which is worthy of your scholarship and of his humanity. He would call your attention to Trapezuntio's inaccurate translation of the Greek classical writers into Latin, and begs you to revise them. He would also have you copy the fragments found by Poggio of unknown works by Cicero, Lucretius and Plautus, and the

Satyrikon of Petronius, and, finally, translate into French selections chosen by yourself, from such favourite Fathers of the Church as Tertullian, Lactantius, Augustine and Gregory of Tours. It is possible that new transcriptions of the Vulgate and exegetical works of various kinds may also be required. The King is sending you the necessary documents from his own library."

The Cardinal, who, some distance from him, was leaning against the bars on the further side of the cage, listened with ever increasing astonishment. A flush quickly suffused his face, which had grown sallow since his confinement.

"That is a wonderfully kind thought," he said gently. "Pray thank His Majesty for me."

At a sign from Oliver, the keeper closed the opening through which the volumes bound in pig-skin, the manuscripts, the writing materials and the tapers had been handed. Whereupon the attendants left the room, and Oliver was about to follow, when Balue exclaimed:

"I should like to speak to you for a moment, Master." And with the joy of the scholar handling the books he loves, he began to put the documents in order.

Somewhat astonished, Necker turned towards him. The Cardinal waited until the door had closed behind Bart and the other men. Then, leaving the table on which the folios lay, he beckoned the Master to the cage. Oliver obeyed. Balue pressed his face to the bars and spoke in a low voice:

"You are no devil, Necker, or at least you are not a devil now. Nor were you a devil in Compiègne when the King was examining me. I owe you an apology."

Oliver protested in pained tones:

"Don't talk about that, Monsignor; you may be mistaken. Even now I am only carrying out the King's commands."

"I am making no mistake, Necker," said the Cardinal emphatically; "the alleviations which have been vouchsafed me — the warmth, the food, the wine, the books — all these are not the thought of the Valois, of that I am certain. The cage is the only thing that he has thought of."

Necker gave him a piercing look.

"Do you imagine, Balue, that with such words you will be able to file through the iron bars of this cage?"

The prisoner shook his head sadly.

"I believe no such thing, Master. The thought never occurred to me. I am not even sure whether the brutality of the King, which would have cut short the wretched years of life that remain to me, is not preferable to your humanity, which will keep me alive for years of torture."

Oliver remained silent for a while, his brow puckered in thought. Then he asked in a whisper:

"Do you wish to die, Balue?"

The Cardinal retreated a step.

"I don't quite understand you, Master," he replied with some hesitation. "Certainly I have no wish to live much longer."

Oliver thrust his nose and mouth between the bars.

"Should you like some poison, Monsignor? I have some knowledge of such things."

Balue raised his arms.

"I am a Christian and a Prince of the Church," he said gravely.

Necker grinned at him between the bars.

"*Apaga Satana . . .*" muttered Balue, retreating to the back of the cage. Oliver went away laughing.

AFRAID lest by refusing he might lose the fruit which, though not yet tasted, had fallen into his lap through the Treaty of Péronne, Charles of France, Louis' younger brother, who was now twenty-five, accepted the King's cordial invitation to come to him. Knowing little more about Burgundy than the latter knew about this obscure proceeding — perhaps even less, for the Duke was but little inclined to reveal to a Valois the questionable and hardly creditable part he had played — and warned only by vague phrases to take good care of his person, so valuable to the cause of the League, without giving offence to the King, or betraying any weakness, this miserable young specimen of royalty, entirely dependent upon the advice of a few confidants, decided to entrust himself to Louis' brotherly care. It was certainly strange that in the King's invitation there was no reference to Charles's repeated requests that the terms of the treaty should be fulfilled — that he should be invested with the two promised dukedoms. But possibly Louis, by his friendly tone, wished to convey that these formalities would

follow as a matter of course. Pierre d'Urfé, Charles's mentor and moving spirit, even hoped that in a favourable moment he might obtain from the King an official and binding repetition of his consent to the proposed marriage of Charles to the Duke of Burgundy's young daughter. He had heard confidentially that this consent, which was constantly being postponed, had been given to the Duke, not by the King himself but through Oliver, on the march to Liége. The minister thought he saw in Louis' behaviour in Péronne and Liége a fundamental change in his policy towards Burgundy, and thought he would now be able to realise his ambitious marriage scheme if only he could make it appear in the eyes of the King an advantage to the dynasty, and a means of securing the succession in the event of Louis having no more children. But the King, who had no son, and disliked his brother Charles because he was a member of the League and also heir presumptive to the throne, knew very well why he had hitherto prevented the young prince from gaining such a dangerous access of power during his own lifetime. For it was not so much the puny shadow of Charles of Valois that he feared, as the great form of Burgundy, who by means of this marriage would certainly try to seize the crown of St. Louis. When, in Péronne, he had, with his demoniacal skill, seemed not only to hand over to the rebel Charles the two provinces which were of such immense strategic value to Burgundy but had also apparently given his consent to the marriage, his brother's fate had already been sealed at the midnight conference which had taken place a little while before.

On the eve of Charles's arrival, the King sat in secret conclave with Tristan, Jean de Beaune, and Oliver; and, like mysterious Fates, they discussed the span of life to be allotted to their guest. Louis was in favour of a death which in the eyes of the world would appear to have been natural, and must take place within the space of a few weeks. He urged this in order to avoid the dangers which, at a subsequent date, might arise through being bound either by treaty or by blood to Burgundy, and also in order to strike the Duke a heavy blow through the prompt reversion of all Charles's estates to the Crown. Whereupon the remaining members of the League, Armagnac, Nemours, and St. Pol, would be put out of the way, the danger from England would be removed by means of a bribe, and

Burgundy would be diverted and kept busy by Germany and the faithful Swiss. Such was the genial political programme which the King had mapped out with Oliver, on that fateful night, beneath the shadow of the castle tower in Péronne, and which was calculated to bring about the unity of the realm. Not one of the confidential advisers of the King dared to lay violent hands on this prodigious and carefully planned structure; but the fate destined for Charles, the King's brother, displeased both Tristan and Jean de Beaune, though Oliver said nothing. The Provost was in favour of a proper judicial trial, such as had been carried out in the case of Balue, and was of opinion that a similar procedure should be adopted with Nemours and St. Pol. As one who, despite all his callousness and countless violations of right, on professional grounds alone rejected the idea of assassination, he was in favour of risking the political disadvantages of offending Europe, more particularly as capital crimes would in these cases not have to be invented, but were established facts. The King shook his head.

"That is impossible, my friend," he said. "Do you suppose that I have not thought of all that myself? Charles is my brother, and cannot be treated like a corrupt minister, or a rebellious vassal. He may quite well be the successor to the throne. If he were sentenced to death — and no other punishment can be considered if I am to achieve my end — not only would all Burgundy's wrath be once more concentrated upon me with a violence hitherto unknown, but it would also isolate me for the time being, and forge the links of a new League against me. It would drive even the Bourbons, Dammartin, Sforza and Anjou over to my enemies, alienate Rome and our sworn allies, and bring England, Germany and Spain into the picture. It would mean not only my own death and yours, my friends; it would also mean the end of this realm."

Louis had spoken quite simply, his voice hardly raised above a whisper. Yet the portentous meaning of the words echoed through the room like a blare of trumpets. The pitiless might of their master filled the servants with awe and struck them dumb. A profound silence reigned. As old Tristan looked at the King, an expression of veneration entered his eyes which was as unusual as the deep emotion he felt, and made him clasp his hands as if in prayer. Oliver, leaning against the

window-sill, with his arms folded, raised a hand to his chin and looked gravely on the ground. Beaune seemed to rouse himself from a deep reverie, when the King, banishing silence as it were with a gesture, said to him:

"And what is your objection, friend Jean?"

His physical and mental constitution made the Treasurer, of all four men, the most good-natured and patient. His indolent and sybaritic attitude to life made him shrink from any direct interference with human existence. By no means cowardly at heart, and capable of a professional vigour which enabled him, by the exercise of the most inconceivable wiles, to suck money from the weak and needy masses, this man who had financed the King's frequently expensive political schemes, and enabled him to realise his great statesmanlike ideas, had, nevertheless, retained a certain humanity, which shrank from any brutal or underhand destruction of human life, and a delicate sensitiveness which could not endure the sight or mention of violent death. Thus, although he was silenced by the King's arguments, and grasped their iron logic, which was irrefutable, his honest nature forced him hotly to oppose the scheme when Louis asked him his opinion.

"There is one point I do not understand, Sire," he said after some hesitation. "Why is sentence of death the only alternative?"

"For two reasons," was Louis' quick reply. "I could hardly delegate Charles of Valois to the oubliettes — that is to say, make him disappear — without the risk of provoking ill-suppressed indignation against me. And at most I could only keep him there until my death. By such means, therefore, I should gain nothing and escape nothing. Besides, I must not create a precedent which might be used in the case of Nemours and the Constable, who must die."

"And what about Balue?" Jean de Beaune ventured to interpose.

"Balue is not a prince of the blood royal. He has no land and no troops. He is dangerous only as an instrument. And instruments can be forgotten in the oubliettes."

The Treasurer said no more, and did not reveal how far he had been convinced, or reconciled to the King's attitude. Louis turned a little impatiently to Necker:

"You have hitherto kept silence, Oliver. I remember that in Péronne also you gave no definite reply when I outlined this plan to you. For certain very good reasons it would be hopeless if you, too, were to raise objections to it, regrettable though it undoubtedly is."

Necker raised his head and smiled faintly.

"Surely it is enough if he who has to decide can see no objections to it, Sire," he said in his mysterious way, "for in that case he himself removes all compunction from the minds of those who have to obey. I do not contest anything that has been said; all I wish to do is to repeat a remark of your Majesty's—an important remark of which it struck me that even you yourself, Sire, did not appreciate the full significance."

"Well?" Louis enquired, raising his shoulders. The two others gazed intently at the Master.

"Duke Charles might be the successor to the throne. Perhaps I may be allowed to be more precise, Sire—Duke Charles is the successor to the throne; for, as far as his age is concerned, he might well be the Dauphin who has been denied you."

"Certainly, certainly," cried the King, somewhat surprised. "So well do I appreciate this fact that I am sentencing myself to ruthlessness towards my own flesh and blood."

Once again Oliver gave a furtive smile.

"The mildest sentence that has been pronounced this evening," he observed candidly. "You attach importance to the negative, Sire. Yet, while I in no way object to the destruction of his life, I would merely venture to point out that in thinking of the necessary destruction, you appear to have forgotten the equally necessary part of construction."

The King looked expectantly, though with some anxiety, at his trusted minister. He knew that this man, who was so deeply attached to him, never uttered a word of warning which had not already illumined his own mind like a flash of lightning. He became uncertain.

"What have I forgotten, Oliver?" he enquired almost humbly.

"You have forgotten, Sire, that after Charles's death you will be the last of the Valois. You have only two daughters, who are promised to foreign princes. After Charles's death you will

have no heir to the throne. You are on the point of exterminating your own dynasty in his person."

For a moment the King appeared to be taken aback by the brutal logic of Oliver's reasoning. He frowned and bit his lip. Then he exclaimed excitedly:

"But I have no dynastic ambitions! My concern is for the state. As Charles's weakness and treachery put the future existence of the state in jeopardy, he must be thrust out of the way, Valois or no Valois. And as the House of Bourbon is related to me, and represents my policy, and seems to possess the necessary qualifications for the maintenance of the inheritance, let it produce the heir."

For the third time Oliver smiled.

"But the House of Savoy is also related to you, Sire," he observed, "and even Bourbon was a member of the first League of the Public Weal, and, according to your own showing, might in certain circumstances be a member of the second. Besides, Bourbon is also related to Burgundy. The prince who is a relative should be held in less esteem than the prince who professes to be your friend. They are all opportunists. And should you — which God forbid! — die before Burgundy, I really do not know whether Bourbon or Charles of France would give the Duke most difficulty."

The King stared blankly before him.

"Burgundy will not live longer than I shall," he said, his lips hardly moving as he spoke. "But perhaps you are right, Oliver. What do you advise me to do, then?"

Necker drew a step or two nearer, and said slowly and gravely:

"If you destroy one successor to the throne, your Majesty, you must procreate another."

Louis glanced quickly up at him. The other councillors, completely taken aback, marvelled that the extraordinary boldness of Necker's argument did not make the King flare up in anger or else laugh in his face. But he remained quite calm.

"I am fifty-three years of age . . ." was all he said, but stopped suddenly when he saw Oliver raise his brows in mockery. He was not slow to see the profound wisdom and significance of the astonishing suggestion; but his uneasy conscience reminded him of the sinister ties binding him to the man

who had warned him. Was it Necker's object by such means, which were quite worthy of his genius, to tear Anne away from him? In a flash he recognised the depth of his great love and the danger that threatened it; for at the very moment he visualised Anne's beautiful body, he also knew that he would not be able to reject Oliver's advice.

"For fifteen years," he said in a low voice, and with a strange expression of bashfulness, "I have had no relations with Charlotte of Savoy." Oliver shrugged his shoulders and observed coldly:

"Is it now your pleasure, Sire, in the interests of the state, to resume your marital relations, if only for a short time, and . . ."

For a moment he hesitated and cast his eyes on the floor.

" . . . without altering the habits of your private life overmuch?" he added hastily.

Louis looked at him with vague feelings of compassion.

"So you would make my brother's life depend on the birth of the Dauphin, Oliver?" he enquired at last. "At the best this would mean a delay of at least a year. That is a very long time."

Oliver was silent, and Jean de Beaune cried out excitedly:

"Then at least wait that year, Sire! Wait for Fate to decide!"

"Wait a little while, Sire," agreed Tristan. "And if Fate says no, then you may be the deciding factor. Meanwhile, you will be able to occupy time to useful purpose."

Once more the King glanced enquiringly at Necker.

"I have not yet heard your last word, Oliver."

With a determined gesture Necker replied:

"If you maltreat Duke Charles, Sire, and if you hesitate to invest him with the two provinces, which would naturally be dangerous, you will only arouse his fears. Far better persuade him to accept another province, which is not so dangerously situated, and thus automatically produce friction between him and Burgundy. Force him quickly into opposition, which will compromise Nemours or St. Pol, or both, and will also put the Burgundian marriage beyond the realm of possibility. The programme for dealing with the guilty parties must be modified so that every year may be usefully employed. I see no political necessity for opening the distressing dance with Duke Charles.

Let us begin with Nemours, who, in spite of the territories he has gained, is sufficiently suspicious or badly informed to have mobilised troops with his cousin Armagnac in the south. St. Pol can still be used for the present as a check on Burgundy, and is, moreover, difficult to lay hold of. Let us place him second — thus the year will be fully occupied, and turned to good account."

The King reflected, and two deep, parallel furrows formed between his brows.

"Are you all agreed on this, friends?" he enquired. Tristan and Jean de Beaune nodded. Louis rose to his feet.

"I cannot come to a decision so quickly, my friends," he said. "There are certain obstacles that must be removed. I will think it over to-night. I thank you, Oliver, Tristan and Jean."

DUKE CHARLES had inherited all the ugliness of his sickly father's face, all the crookedness of character, the weakness and suspiciousness of the old man's spirit, without even remotely approaching his elder brother in genius. He was a gaunt, pigeon-chested creature who bore himself badly. In addition to the thick, coarse lips and the heavy nose of the King, he had thin, almost invisible eyebrows which were perpetually raised, and beneath them small, tired eyes which were always slightly inflamed and half-closed, while his cheeks were flabby and his ears projecting. He was received in such friendly fashion, and with such a display of royal pomp and brotherly affection, that he immediately suspected behind the courteous efforts that had been made some sort of political trap — indeed, so convinced was he of this that he was absurdly cautious in both word and manner. The astute d'Urfé regarded Louis' broad smile of welcome and the bewildering vagueness and intangibility of what he said as a cover for some political object, which was probably as dangerous as the pains to give it an appearance of innocence were prodigious; and his view was shared by Poncet de Rivière, who, after the apparent reconciliation of the King with Burgundy, and the magnificent rehabilitation of his friend du Lau, now safely installed as Governor of Perpignan, was aiming at returning to the royal fold by the devious route provided by the King's brother, Charles. The speeches from both sides were

so full of falsehood and laboured exaggeration that the King, who was a master in such arts of negotiation, grew ever more and more light-hearted, while Oliver, whose plan Louis had as yet neither approved nor rejected, and who would have been better pleased to see the guest intimidated in a straightforward manner, followed the course of events with some misgiving and not a little depression.

When at last, with the utmost caution, Pierre d'Urfé formulated his question and asked when his Majesty would be pleased to ratify the Treaty of Péronne, in so far as it concerned Charles of France, the King, smiling as though he were thinking of something else, raised his head and, with a slight drawl, replied:

"Péronne . . . Péronne . . . I once remarked, at a time when my spirit was depressed, that the name sounded like a death-knell. Is that not so, Seigneur le Mauvais?"

Oliver nodded, and looked relieved. He thought he understood what the King was aiming at. D'Urfé and Poncet de Rivière looked embarrassed, and Duke Charles, at a loss how to behave, became offensive. With confused gestures, by which he seemed to be urging on his halting words, he threw all caution to the winds and burst out:

"May I be allowed, Sire, to request you, in the spirit of friendship and brotherly love which you have — always . . . always deigned to show me, to proceed to the investiture while I am still staying with your Majesty . . . I confess that I should be extremely grateful to you — especially the investiture, and your Majesty's consent to my marriage with Maria of Burgundy."

He stopped. Louis looked at him with his strange smile and asked gently:

"Do you not miss someone from the circle of my councillors, brother?"

An embarrassed and deathly silence was the only reply. Duke Charles looked appealingly at d'Urfé. The latter, however, had observed that Oliver and Tristan were hardly able to conceal their satisfaction and contempt, and that Jean de Beaune with difficulty turned his laugh into a cough. Secretly cursing his master's foolishness, and vexed at the defeat that seemed imminent, he made a final attempt to save the situation.

"May we beg your Majesty to tell us plainly whether the pact sworn at Péronne — more especially the part of it relating to Duke Charles of France — has been the subject of any misunderstanding, or has met with any unexpected obstacles?"

But the King did not allow himself to be caught. With his gift for confusing, alarming and crushing his adversary by the suggestive, though apparently unpremeditated and careless subtlety of his dialectic, which was in reality thought out with meticulous care, he always, as if by chance, returned with agonising stubbornness to the vulnerable point in his enemy's armour.

"Péronne," he repeated thoughtfully, as though d'Urfé's pointed question had merely recalled the allegory of its name once more to his mind. "Péronne did indeed ring the death-knell of many things — enmities and friendships, hopes and doubts, conspirators and imbeciles. Methinks, my lords, that the music of the name is not the same for all ears. To my ears it sounds like a death-knell; you, my lords, would fain interpret it in the light of joy-bells of peace. Well, perhaps, after all, as far as the ultimate effect is concerned, there is not much difference."

Then, suddenly changing his attitude of reverie, he thumped his fist on the table and exclaimed sharply:

"You, my lords, talk of the solemn convention; I refer to the conspiracy of Péronne. Well, perhaps, after all, as far as the ultimate effect is concerned, there is not much difference — no greater difference than there is between Champagne together with Brie, which for very good reasons, brother, I cannot give you, and the Dukedom of Guienne together with La Rochelle, which you are to receive!"

He threw a challenging glance round the assembly, and noted the expressions of blank surprise which this unexpected thrust had provoked. But he allowed his listeners no time to recover.

"You seem surprised, my lords," he observed, resuming his old courteous tone. "Apparently you know nothing of what took place behind the scenes in Péronne, and do not understand my justification for making the slight modification of the agreement which I have just mentioned. And you have not missed Cardinal Balue, who tried to play his King into the hands of

the enemy, but in the end found himself forced to disclose, not only his own game, but also that of his fellow-conspirators? Some of the ramifications of the plot thus revealed were passing strange, though they did not take me by surprise. As a man of the world, I had either to smile or to frown on the rebels' game, for the sake, not of my own person, but of the realm itself. And yet you, my brother, are apparently not inclined on any account to smile on the exchange of one province for another."

As he uttered this last thinly-veiled threat, the King scarcely raised his voice, but in his eyes, beneath their stern, straight brows, there was the familiar piercing, uncanny and mercilessly omniscient expression which no one could meet. Duke Charles, completely taken aback, sat blinking his eyes. A hideous flush had suddenly suffused both sides of his nose, and, for some reason, he shook his head. To save the last remnants of their advantage, Pierre d'Urfé sprang into the breach.

"My master will certainly endeavour to the best of his ability, particularly when he learns the reasons for this change in the provinces that are to come to him, to be, as he has ever been, your Majesty's most loyal brother. And he will sacrifice the personal reasons which prompted him to favour Champagne and Brie to your superior judgment, Sire."

Once more Duke Charles shook his head, and helplessly raising it, murmured:

"Without consulting the Duke of Burgundy . . ."

The King interrupted him with a laugh.

"Brother, for the sake of that loyalty which you are supposed to bear me, I will have the good grace not to hear your objection to the end; otherwise it would hardly be possible for me to conceal my frown — and a frown, my lords, can invest a vassal with a far poorer province than Guienne!"

D'Urfé, driven to desperation, tried to speak and restore the equanimity of the discussion. But the King, still laughing, his eyes gleaming with a brutal resolve, had already stood up.

"It is always a good and useful experience," he exclaimed, "to come face to face with reality! My beloved brother, Seigneurs d'Urfé and le Mauvais, I invite you to come with me to Cardinal Balue's new abode. Seigneur Poncet de Riviére will await our return in the company of my trusty councillors."

A glance informed the latter how they were to occupy the interval.

Ten minutes later Balue, absorbed in a mass of folios and parchments, heard the rattling of the lock and the heavy door of his prison swing on its hinges. Turning his head and blinded by the glowing light at his side, he blinked into the darkness; but no one entered by the open door. All he heard outside were two stifled cries of surprise and horror. He stood up, strode to the front of his cage, pressed his face against the iron bars and grasped them right and left with his hands. Once more he heard a suppressed "Mother of Jesus!" out of the darkness. Then the door was closed and bolted again. Shaking his head, he returned to his work.

Ten minutes later the four returned to the council chamber, the King smiling courteously, Duke Charles with face flushed, and staggering like a drunken man, Pierre d'Urfé pale and erect, and Oliver stern and grave. Meanwhile, Poncet de Rivière had learned how near he was to obtaining a fat lieutenancy in the Bourbonnais, and was waiting in high spirits for the opportunity of securing it.

"Have you still any objection, brother?" Louis enquired in friendly tones. Duke Charles shook his head. Poncet de Rivière hastened to add his word.

"Remember, my lord," he said, addressing Duke Charles, "that Guienne, together with the Government of la Rochelle, is a larger and more beautiful territory than Champagne and Brie, and also that your friendship with Burgundy should come second to His Majesty's wishes."

Jean de Beaune grinned. Poncet de Rivière had won his lieutenancy.

"Like the intelligent and faithful advisers they are, brother," observed the King, "your councillors are of my opinion." Pierre d'Urfé thereupon boldly acted as spokesman for his master, who had completely lost command of himself.

"My lord will accept Guienne," he said.

Duke Charles nodded.

"Good," said Louis kindly. "There is but one small detail left to consider. You, brother, will write to the Duke of Burgundy and tell him that you have voluntarily resigned your claims to Champagne and Brie, and in their stead have accepted

the province of Guienne together with La Rochelle, which you prefer. Perhaps you could arrange to write this very day."

Once again there was an embarrassed silence. At last Poncet de Rivière ventured to remark:

"I think such a letter would be only loyal and reasonable, my lord."

Again d'Urfé answered for the bewildered prince:

"My lord will write the letter this very day, Sire, and I will hand it to you for despatch."

Duke Charles nodded.

"Good," said Louis complaisantly. "Oh, and one thing further, brother: should our cousin of Burgundy really wish to forward your marriage with Maria — which I am inclined to doubt — I shall certainly put no difficulties in your way."

Oliver, Provost Tristan and Jean de Beaune grinned.

ANNE sent a message through Daniel Bart to ask Oliver whether, busy though he was, he could spare her a quarter of an hour. The humble form of the request, which Bart studiously preserved in order to emphasise the dumb reproach it contained, had the effect, despite Necker's stern resolve, of bringing him a few minutes later to the apartments which for weeks he had ceased to enter. In doing so, however, he was forced to acknowledge that he was not yielding to any feelings of anxiety concerning Anne herself; he went because of a strange suspicion, which at first was not clear even to himself, that his wife's request was in some way connected with the troublous problem that was agitating his own and the King's mind. Louis, clearly harassed by the struggle between his passion and his political wisdom, had as yet reached no solution. Oliver had been quick to realise that the King's accommodating attitude during the negotiations about his brother's appanage, which, in accordance with Necker's plan, had been concluded by overwhelming Charles with a display of superior power, was only a compromise with himself, a slight change of strategy, which could do no harm and yet appealed to his love of intrigue. But his thoughtful and uncommunicative features had as yet revealed by no sign or movement that he had agreed to carry out Necker's great idea to its extremest consequences — that is to say, to grant his brother the necessary respite, and summon

the Queen, an elderly woman who had become a stranger to him, to the nuptial bed. Oliver was, moreover, aware that he had of late spent almost every night with Anne.

His wife glanced up from her embroidery frame and turned her pale face towards him as he entered. Her features had grown somewhat sharper, and her mouth, owing to the many thoughts to which it had never given utterance, had become smaller. As often happens with those who, while they love laughter, have been driven to solitude, good cheer had been frightened away, leaving behind it sharp lines of pain which ran from the corners of the mouth up to the nostrils and down to the chin. As she was not given overmuch to weeping, the shadows under her lustreless eyes were not deepened by tears and did not make her look old, but, in striking contrast to her chaste mouth, gave her a lascivious expression. The movements of her body, moreover, were tired and listless, as is usual with courtesans who have learnt to separate their indolent bodies from the secret feelings with which they are animated.

Coldly and courteously Oliver kissed her hand.

"Why do you wish to see me?" he asked, covertly observing her.

"I thank you," she said softly, looking at him with wide-open eyes, "for having come so quickly, Oliver. Truth to tell, I wish for nothing; I am only troubled by a sort of hope, Oliver."

Necker made a grimace.

"Do you mean that you have your own hopes about a Dauphin?" he asked brutally. She lowered her eyes and said sadly:

"Yes, Oliver, I was hoping for you."

Necker shook his head gravely and, without saying a word, turned towards the door. Anne bowed her head humbly and folded her hands across her knee. Nor did she raise her head as she called after him in agonised tones:

"He dreads it!"

Oliver, much agitated, stopped short. Had Louis told her this? Had Louis confided to her this last thought, which he had not dared to confess even to him? Was this love becoming dangerous?

"What does he dread?" he enquired over his shoulder.

"That in all this affair you have been thinking of me, in spite of . . ."

She could go no further. Possibly, at this moment, she feared she might say too much.

"In spite of . . . ?" Oliver insisted. She continued, speaking fast and low:

" . . . in spite of the fact that you told him he would not need to alter the habits of his private life overmuch."

Almost the very words, thought Oliver in astonishment. They are almost the very words I spoke to him! He has no secrets from her, but he says nothing to me! He turned to face her once more.

"His fears are as unfounded as your hopes," he said harshly. "You know that very well, Anne. What I said to him I honestly meant. Would you stop him, Anne?"

She did not look at him.

"I certainly have no right to do so," she rejoined simply, speaking ever more slowly; "but, you see, Oliver, he loves me very much; it seems to me that my body is everything to him; I feel that it prevents him from thinking of any other body. So perhaps he will not — be — able . . ."

Oliver bit his lips. This was precisely what he had feared. He looked back with feelings of pain. Had his wife's bewitching body ever allowed any other body to tempt *his* senses?

"Will you be going to him to-night?" he asked after a while, his face turned away.

"Yes."

"I shall come with him to the turret chamber," he said with some hesitation; "make arrangements to overhear our conversation. This will help you to decide your final course of action, Anne."

"Yes," she said, and held out a hand to him. He kissed it coldly and courteously and went to the door.

"It will be as well," he said from the threshold, "for you to be ill when the Queen comes, Anne."

"I shall be only too glad to be ill, Oliver," she murmured.

It was the evening before the departure of the new Duke of Guienne. The banquet concluding the ceremonies of investiture and Charles's visit to Amboise, which had been characterised by

the usual pompous succession of courses, drinks and diversions, was drawing to a close. Thanks to the continued kindness of his royal brother, the important increase of territory he had been given, and the congratulations he had received on all sides, which had quickly consoled him for the somewhat high-handed manner in which the exchange had been effected, Duke Charles's spirits had gradually risen. Indeed, on this particular evening, enlivened by the wine, by the gaiety of his equally satisfied councillors and the friendly speeches of the strange gentlemen about him, and above all by the thought of the morning, now close at hand, which was to deliver him safe and sound out of the hands of his dangerous brother, the young prince became so light-hearted and careless that he even dared to laugh and become quite talkative. His eyes unusually bright with conscious self-esteem, his cheeks and nose aglow, he began to parry the thrusts of Jean de Beaune and Tristan l'Hermite, and, growing more communicative, he was, by way of a joke, on the point of revealing to them the plans and methods of the League that had just been broken up, when a desperate burst of laughter and a terrible glance from Pierre d'Urfé suddenly made him change the subject. Thus, half drunk as he was, he did not notice that as the evening wore on, the King grew more and more silent, and that, while his own spirits rose and he ceased to observe what was happening, his brother became ever more reserved and unfriendly. Oliver, however, was well aware of the kind of thoughts that were at work behind Louis' frowning brows making his eyelids droop. The quick glances and sharp words which he shot from time to time at Charles betrayed the observant monarch's dark intention to leave the decision regarding his fate to the deliberation of that night, and Oliver braced himself for the struggle.

It was the King himself who, at midnight, after the conclusion of the banquet, commanded Oliver to follow him to his turret chamber; and, while Oliver was closing the door which led to the castle, Louis, after a moment's hesitation, drew aside the panel door, and climbed the winding stair. Necker waited in astonishment. It was the first time that the King had so openly acknowledged the proximity of Anne. On previous occasions — ay, even on the night before, when he had sat with Oliver at that hour in his work-room, although both knew that Anne lay

awaiting him on the couch above, Louis had nevertheless had the grace to pretend to Oliver's face that it was not so, and had even allowed his councillor to accompany him back as far as his bedroom in the castle. Never before had he opened the secret door in the panelling, until he had heard the Master's footsteps die away in the distance. Oliver waited, heard the two conversing in low tones, and then, a few seconds later, the King's steps sounded on the stairs. He smiled faintly when Louis stepped back into the room and closed the panel door.

"Sire," he said, after a while, still standing close to the wall, "we had the same idea. I, too, begged Anne to listen to our conversation to-night."

The King, taken aback, looked at him for a moment; then, with a laugh, he called out:

"Come in, madam!"

Oliver immediately opened the door in the panelling. Anne, her hair loose about her shoulders and wrapped in a fur-trimmed cloak of richly embroidered crimson silk, her bare feet encased in wadded slippers, stood in the frame of the door, a picture of beauty and voluptuousness, stiff with fear and embarrassment.

"Come in, madam," the King repeated with his customary smile, and gallantly offered her his great arm-chair at the table. "As both Oliver and I, quite independently of each other, wished you to listen to our conversation, there is no longer any need for you to conceal yourself. Take the place which is yours by right."

Anne, with a slight shrug of her shoulders and head bowed, crossed with short quick steps in front of the two men. Oliver was grave and did not look at her. With her white face turned aside, and the flaming cloak about her, she sat in the majestic chair, a strange and alluring picture, white as marble, red as blood, enthroned in sovereignty. She sat erect, without leaning back, her arms pressed to her side, her hands in her lap. Her head was slightly bowed, and she kept her eyes on the surface of the table. The King leant against a huge chest in front of her. Oliver had remained standing in the background, close to the open panel door.

"Speak, friend," said Louis simply. "You know what we have to discuss."

Oliver shook his head.

"One thing at least," he replied with decision, "is no longer a matter for discussion. To-morrow Duke Charles will leave Amboise safe in mind and body."

"You know very well," said the King thoughtfully, "that this is precisely what I wish to discuss with you. For the last few days I have concerned myself more with this poor wretch than his frail life is worth. He can injure me. And what is more, he *will* injure me. Pierre d'Urfé will immediately begin spinning his web again — in the north across Brittany and Normandy to Burgundy, in the south towards Sippe Nemours-Armagnac, and possibly towards disaffected Aragon as well. A year is a long time, Oliver. If, however, within the space of four weeks, I could have the right to march into Guienne as a province that had lapsed to the Crown, that web could easily be torn down for ever."

"Sire," said Oliver gravely, "one hour after Charles's departure you will command the Grand Master with his army to wrest the district of Rouergue from Armagnac. You will then have surrounded Guienne on the east and south. The Bretons in the north are still weak from fighting. You have Normandy in your power. A year, which is not so very long a time, will see Duke Charles rendered innocuous, either because he is contented and satisfied or because he is anxious and afraid; and the other rebels will be put out of the way. Just examine the matter, Sire, and ask yourself whether you and I can believe in your objection."

The King was silent. Oliver continued quickly:

"And one further point, Sire. Who alone, in the ten hours that yet remain to you, can give you the right to march into Guienne?"

Louis was silent. Oliver smiled darkly.

"On the other hand, your conscience would not obey such a command," he said softly, "for your motives have nothing whatever to do with political necessity."

He took two steps towards the King.

"Your conscience would not consent to any low murder, Sire — least of all for the sake of a woman."

Louis raised his hand with an expression of pain. Anne did not stir. Oliver stood directly in front of the King.

"And the King," he said sharply, "may no more escape

from the dominion of his conscience than Balue may escape from his cage. And conscience must be as hard as iron bars, Sire, and command with a hard voice. And what it tells you, Sire, at this moment, is that the force which is jeopardising the safety of the realm is not Duke Charles, or the League, but the woman who is sitting there."

With a wave of his hand, though without turning to look at her, he pointed to Anne.

"And it also says that the alcove up there must have nothing to do with politics, if it is not to become a menace and a danger."

Anne remained still as stone; even the brutal reference to herself caused no muscle to stir in her face or her rigid body. The King, moving slightly away from Oliver, gazed at her. Her eyes were agitated, her motionless figure seemed to cause him pain. He shrugged his shoulders and asked the strange question:

"Why do I not defend you, madam?"

Anne raised her calm face up to him and parted her lips slightly so as to show her teeth, but it was not a smile she gave him but a confession of unutterable woe. Then, speaking very softly, as if from a distance, and shaking her head gently, she said:

"He may speak as he does. . . . He will not have me again —"

"I know it," Louis muttered in confusion, "I know it. . . ."

Oliver had gradually retreated to the wall; he did not wish the agony in his eyes to be seen. The King turned to look at him.

"Will you threaten Anne if I refuse to obey, Oliver?" he enquired suddenly.

Can he see my face? wondered Necker. Am I still weak, after all? Gravely he replied:

"It is not for the King to obey! The King will inform the Queen to-morrow. Nobody will prevent him from doing so."

"No one . . ." Anne repeated, in low tones. Louis threw up his arms and cried:

"Oh, miserable wretch that I am!"

He quickly raised his head, as if startled by his own voice; then he heard the voice that came from the wall, which also seemed to be his own:

“ . . . and I obey the King!”

Anne stood up, as if she had been commanded to do so. With short, quick steps she crossed in front of Louis and Oliver. The latter, standing by the panel door, did not look at her. Her flame-coloured cloak disappeared, and the clink of her heels could be heard on the steps of the winding stair. The room below seemed dark and cold. Nothing more was said, and the two men avoided each other's eyes. Oliver bowed and left. When his footsteps had died away, Louis crept through the opening in the panelling, and locked the sliding door behind him.

Chapter 3

HUSBAND AND WIFE

QUEEN CHARLOTTE, a quiet, prematurely aged woman of forty-two, had grown reconciled to her unhappy fate. By no means soft and yielding by nature, the proud blood of her father and of Anne of Cyprus had, in the early days of her marriage, often driven her to rebel. But the unequal struggle with Louis' intellectual superiority and political hardness soon broke her spirit. The King had married her when he was still Dauphin, for, as a son in rebellion against his father, the friendship of his mighty neighbour of Savoy was a necessity to him. As soon as he ascended the throne, however, his keen eye recognised the superior power of Duke Sforza of Milan, whereupon, with complete lack of consideration, he immediately turned his back on Savoy. This hostility towards the beloved house of her fathers broke Charlotte's heart. The consciousness of her own lack of influence with Louis, emphasised by the fact that he failed to show her even ceremonial courtesy and respect, made her timid in his presence, whilst the brutal and unscrupulous plans which he conceived against her home and family and carried out under her very eye, and which she was quite powerless to circumvent, the ill-concealed hatred surrounding her and her own detestation of her lot, which she was bound constantly to suppress, combined with the sufferings of her wounded pride, had made an old woman of her. The loneliness of her little castle in Touraine and the gradual weakening of her spiritual resistance, made her weary and taciturn, so that when her brother was cast into prison she had no tears left for him.

The physical isolation in which the King had kept her for fifteen years was but the smallest hardship of her painful lot. Her body, for six years the plaything of the King's lusts, broken and exhausted by the birth of five children in quick succession, desired only rest. Her sensual impulses troubled her ever less and less, and were early suffocated in the monotony

of her daily routine. The premature death of a son, and of two daughters who had inherited her delicate nature, and were her favourites, her deep aversion for her other two daughters, who were very different from herself in temperament — the eldest being cold, clever, masculine and beautiful, the younger, cold, clever, exceedingly ugly and bashful — seemed to her religious mind but the inevitable and logical consummation of her earthly passion.

The King's command that she should come to him surprised her only because he happened to be at Amboise; for every year there were formal receptions and religious and Court functions at which, for ceremonial reasons, her presence could not be spared. She liked these stiff and formal ceremonies as little as did the King, who even in public treated her with scant courtesy. But in spite of the short distance separating her from Amboise, she had not been there for a long while. Shortly after his separation from her, the King had refused her admittance into the apartments in which he spent his days, and did not allow her to associate with those who were about his person. As the years rolled by, and he grew ever more suspicious and mistrustful, and shut himself up ever more and more studiously in his fortified castle of Amboise, his aversion for her died down into an attitude of complete estrangement and indifference, and all personal relations and intimacy of any kind were so completely eliminated between them that his place of residence and his habits were as strange and unknown to her as hers were to him. When he needed her as a symbol of sovereignty, he commanded her presence on the temporary stage of the royal theatre in Paris, Orleans, Tours, Rheims or Lyons, and as soon as she had played her part, sent her back. She occupied as insignificant a position in his household as she did in his thoughts and interests; yet she had always remained obedient to the call of duty, going whithersoever he commanded, to sit for a few moments in strange pomp beside a strange monarch, departing when he bid her and quietly returning to her isolated and lonely existence without question or complaint. Thus once again she obeyed his summons, knowing that she would not even open her thin lips to confess her astonishment at entering his strange home and the unknown realm in which he spent his days.

It was not the King who received her, but Jean de Beaune. He begged her to excuse his royal master until the evening as he was overwhelmed with work, and conducted her and the few ladies of her suite into the rooms selected and carefully prepared for her. The Treasurer said nothing about the object of her visit or its duration, and his gallant bearing, combined with his natural good temper, did not reveal to the Queen, who was secretly observing him, whether he knew it or not.

Meanwhile Louis was not working. Ever since the departure of his brother he had shut himself up in the turret chamber, allowing no one, except Oliver, to come near him, and was fighting out his great battle with himself to the bitter end. They had been terrible days for the members of the Court, who trembled beneath the breath of the invisible monarch, and for the chief officials, who were tormented by orders and counter-orders, menaces and threats of reprisal proceeding from the ill-omened tower. As was always the case when he was agitated by a power either within or outside himself which he had not yet mastered, this strange man shut himself off from the world; and his autocratic instincts, sick with mistrust of their own power, rose, as they did now, to the height of tyranny. He struggled against the untiring strength of his own passions, knowing that they must be overcome, but he was staggered by their resistance, and connected it all with a strange and painful dread of approaching senility. Meanwhile he hurled from time to time through the thick walls of his tower the proofs of his unbending majesty over the bowed heads of the Court and throughout the length and breadth of his bewildered realm. Oliver, who might have arrested acts of obvious injustice and alleviated the more brutal effects of his sullen rage, let things take their course. For, understanding the struggle as he did, and being a witness of it, he readily granted the King this means of recovery through a counter-irritant.

They had been terrible days for Louis. On the evening after Duke Charles's departure, when he had prepared the despatches to the Grand Master and the Queen, the King sat silent in his study with Oliver, a prey to secret anxiety. One question above all tormented his mind: Why did Anne not come? It wanted but this new and unexpected disappointment before the hateful but inevitable sacrifice of his love to make

that love seem peerless, unique and irresistibly importunate. His passion and the desire to express it again and again, and particularly on that day, almost caused him physical pain. As he could no longer tolerate Oliver's stony countenance, and was anxious to believe that his presence might possibly be keeping his wife from coming, he dismissed him early. Oliver bowed in silence and cast at him before he went a glance devoid of pity and, so it seemed to the King, with that No! in his eyes which made him tremble. Whereupon the silence about him deepened, torturing his nerves to the point of desperation. The circular room was so still that the air seemed to thicken. With his mouth open, Louis searched the walls, breathing heavily. Why did she not come? The objects in the room in their immobility and concrete reality seemed to pierce his eyes with cruel stabs. The world about him and his passion was loveless to the point of blasphemy. Mad with longing for the sight of humanity, he stepped before a mirror and looked at himself, but, with the beauty of his beloved before his senses, he shuddered at his own hideousness and at the old man's mask which stared at him out of its frame of wrinkles and folds. Convulsed with disappointment, he stepped back and began to feel an uncontrollable longing for comfort, for the soothing power of falsehood, and his harassed imagination found it in a strange way. He suddenly realised that his hands were very beautiful, the slender white tapering fingers testifying to the antiquity of his race. He lifted them up to separate them from his pitiful body, held them up to the mirror, stretched them, opened them, folded them, and rejoiced in the beauty of the living picture. But this pastime could last but a few seconds. The clock of the castle church with its brazen note chimed a late hour. Was she unable to come? he asked himself in agony, dropping his arms hopelessly to his side. He thought of those other evenings, those happy evenings, when he had entered this room, this very room, precisely at this hour, and knew that Anne was above the brown rafters. He wanted to lie again — he smiled like a child at the thought — so that by a trick he might make it possible for her to reach the upper chamber unobserved, or might pretend that she was there, or else, for a few minutes, as long as it took him to go through the room and up the blessed steps of the winding stair, give himself the feeling of uncertainty as to whether she was not perhaps

there after all. So he stole out of the turret chamber, crept along the gallery to the inner part of the castle, turned into a side passage in order to give her free access, and waited in a dark, empty council chamber, where, groping towards a chair, he sat upright and stiff as long as he could — whether it was a long or a short time, he knew not. Then he hurried once more to his turret chamber, carefully closed the door which he had left ajar, and which certainly seemed to stand more widely open than he had left it, crossed the room with a smile on his face, stepped through the panel door which he had opened before leaving, and climbed a little more slowly than usual up the winding stair and gently pulled the arras aside. The room was empty! The bed stood sad and, as it were, useless, amid the senseless voluptuousness of the chamber. Chilly stony stillness reigned even here. The fabrics, the colours, the lights were all things without souls, ay, without the will to memory, which man alone could give them. Leaning silently against the wall, his eyes dim, Louis no longer had the power to associate what he saw with the form of his beloved. Had she ever been there, he asked himself again and again. The room was empty. He retraced the footsteps hope had made him take, and slowly allowed the arras to swing back. His knees bent, he descended the winding stair and, with features set and lifeless, he closed the panel door. Then he dropped into his own royal chair, which suddenly seemed to have grown too large for him, so old did he look as he sat with rounded back and drooping shoulders, his arms hanging between his outstretched legs. And thus, his chin sunk on his breast, he stayed he knew not how long.

Then suddenly a thought struck him. He threw back his head and body and opened his eyes. Clenching his fists he sprang quickly to his feet and striding over to the convex gong he reached for the hammer to summon the nearest sentinel. But, thrusting it back into its leather quiver, he shook his head and rushed through the door and along the gallery, so fast that the torch in his hand rained sparks as he went. At the door of his bedroom he pushed past the astonished Scottish Archer and hastened through the robing chamber, suddenly coming to a standstill, panting and quivering, before a certain door. It was the door of Oliver's room, where he slept when he was not wanted either by the King or in his own apartments. Louis laid

a faltering hand upon the latch. What if this room too were to disappoint him? What if this room too were empty? Good God, what if this terrible night were not to pass without blood! He shut his eyes and pulled the latch. The door opened, his ear caught the sound of the heavy breathing of one who slept. He smiled and opened his eyes. Oliver was lying quietly on his small iron bed, his hands behind his neck as was his wont.

"No, no, no," Louis muttered and gently closed the door again. "He is not with her."

He returned to his own bedroom and suddenly felt so tired that every thought in his mind seemed veiled. And thus he fell asleep.

The next evening he felt such a dread of undergoing the same terrible loneliness and suffering again, and his horror of it was so overpowering, that it banished his fear of Necker.

"Stay, stay with me," he cried in agonised tones when Oliver again wished to retire at an early hour. The Master returned to his stool and looked at his lord. Louis' efforts not to speak of Anne were becoming weaker. He had not dared to mention her during the day. He had not even sent Jean de Beaune to her, for he had known ever since the sober light of morning had dawned, bringing with it clarity of thought, why Necker was separating them.

But now, with the terror of the night before him, he gave way.

Overcome by a feeling of pity, Oliver said:

"Hold out but a few days longer, Sire."

Louis looked at him humbly.

"Is she not coming to-night either, brother?"

"No," said Necker with grave decision. The King stood up and clung about his neck.

"I only want to see her," he implored, "only to see her."

Oliver shook his head.

"If it does you good, Sire," he said, "tell yourself that she is sick."

Louis, suddenly shaken and chilled, supported himself on Oliver.

"I am suffering," he groaned, "Oliver, I am suffering!"

"Then suffer, Sire," said Oliver in low tones. "I love you for it."

He remained by his side and soothed him with his kindly serenity. The King was able to sleep.

On the day when the Queen arrived, and was already in the castle patiently awaiting the evening for the appearance of the King, a terrible reaction set in. In sharp tones Louis suddenly commanded Jean de Beaune, who had brought him Her Majesty's greetings, to inform the royal lady that important business had summoned him to Paris, and to request her to return to her own residence early on the morrow.

"You understand, sir," said Oliver, turning carelessly but without hesitation to the messenger, "that His Majesty is pleased to jest."

"I am not jesting!" cried Louis, striking the table with his fist.

"In a quarter of an hour I will return for the confirmation of your Majesty's command, of which even I cannot approve," said Jean de Beaune adroitly, and quickly left the room. Oliver went towards the King.

"If it was not a jest, Sire," he said coldly, "then it surely was not the command of the King."

Louis shook his fists.

"It is the King's command," he roared. "Am I no longer to be obeyed?"

Oliver retreated and bowed.

"The King commands," he said quietly. "He shall be obeyed. . . . The King demands the death of a man; he shall be obeyed."

"Oliver, Oliver," cried Louis, "no, no!"

Then in broken tones, he added:

"I suffer, brother, I suffer!"

Necker bowed low over his hand.

"It is not the King but the man who suffers," he whispered. "Remember this suffering when you are King again."

They said no more. Jean de Beaune returned and waited in silence. Louis looked thoughtfully at him.

"It was my pleasure to jest, sir," he said at last.

EVENING came. Charlotte, somewhat embarrassed, was conversing in low tones with her ladies. The unaccustomed proximity of Louis oppressed her. The strange rooms and the

riddle of why she had been summoned disquieted her. The conversation languished, and the Queen clasped her hands and closed her eyes. Her face, which might once have been not altogether devoid of beauty, had broad, almost coarse features and seemed extraordinarily empty. Her forehead, which after the fashion of the middle of the fifteenth century had been artificially heightened by pulling out the hair, bulged almost like a man's over her short flat nose and her dull, somewhat prominent eyes with their meagre lashes, and was constantly twitching into painful puckers. The use of poisonous cosmetics had made her skin go grey, while time and suffering had traced wrinkles and deep hollows with no sparing hand. Lack of exercise and excessive child-bearing had robbed her body of the elasticity of youth and made it fat and shapeless.

She sighed softly, and sadly raised her shaved brows, which had been faintly pencilled in. One of her ladies-in-waiting, anxious to cheer her, took up a lute and began to sing a soft *gagliarda* which the Queen loved. Charlotte nodded her head to the music and hummed the tune. The door was flung open. The song broke off, and the page, on the threshold, announced: "His Majesty, the King!"

The ladies-in-waiting stood up. Charlotte in great agitation hastily arranged the heavy folds of her gown, drew in her feet and looked up with a wistful smile towards the door. Louis entered with a quick step, removed his shabby hat and kissed her hand perfunctorily. They looked at each other for a moment, and each saw in the other's eyes the surprise at the change that age had wrought. Her glance appeared to offend the King, and throwing back his head he said roughly to the ladies:

"Will the ladies kindly allow me to be alone with Her Majesty?"

They curtsied low and left. The King stared at the carpet beneath Charlotte's chair, and, pressing his lips together, breathed loud and fast, but did not speak. His gaze was concentrated on her feet, his silence and the embarrassment in his tortured features made the Queen completely lose her composure. Her knees trembled beneath the stiff brocade and she coughed in pain. Louis looked up quickly and began to scrutinise her. With cruel and incomprehensible care he slowly examined her hair, her brow, her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her neck, her

breast, until at last his eyes rested on her lap. He said nothing but merely tightened his lips the more. Charlotte's cheeks burned with a strange feeling of shame. She could not tell why his look both stirred and stunned her. She did not know why he looked at her thus and humbled her body, which after all was nothing to him now. She could endure it no longer and, twisting her shoulders in a movement at once helpless and coy, she folded her hands in confusion before her.

"Sire! . . ." she whispered in agony.

The King looked up. Her excitement had brought out irregular red patches on her face, which shone as though it were wet. The network of wrinkles under her eyes had swollen into small sacks which seemed to make her eyes protrude more than ever. She looked so hideous that Louis turned sharply away and took up a position behind a chair at an insulting distance away from her, as though he wished to protect himself. Charlotte bowed her head in humiliation. He shook the richly carved back of the chair as if he were trying to overcome his dumbness by a muscular effort, and at last began hoarsely:

"You may be surprised, Madam, that I summoned you here. It is a matter of . . . it is a question of . . . a certain decision."

The King, who had as great a command of words as he had of the serfs and vassals of his realm, and whose vast intellect had as yet never failed in the attainment of an object or felt any doubt of success, now stumbled hopelessly after stammering a few words, beaten by a sense of repugnance. The terrible voice within him, crying ever louder, "I cannot," which his heart sent coursing with his blood into every limb and every nerve of his body, choked his utterance. Seizing the knobs on the back of the chair, he lifted its heavy weight, his face purple with the strain.

"I am very glad . . . very glad to see Your Majesty again," Charlotte stammered, trying to help.

The King let the chair fall with a crash and in tones of surrender groaned the three words which were all his brain could formulate:

"I — can — not." . . .

Charlotte looked down at her folded hands and the tears stood in her eyes. Her shoulders shook. She understood this

new torment, which she had not expected, as little as she had understood the many sorrows of her past, but she did not dare to ask any questions. After a long silence, during which Louis held his head in his hands, she murmured:

"Are you in trouble, Sire?"

The King did not heed the question. An idea seemed to have entered his mind and he pulled himself together.

"Madam," he said gently, "I have a faithful servant, a trusted adviser, whom I will send to you and to whom I would have you listen. There are certain things, Madam, which are hard to say; as I cannot tell you, he will do so. Wait a few minutes and wait alone. Pray excuse me."

He left the room hastily, his head sunk into his shoulders.

Charlotte, withdrawing into her shell, forbade her soul to question or her aching head to make any attempt at reflection, or at arming herself against attack. She sat bowed down and dumb, her eyes gazing on the floor at the choice little rug from Ispahan at her feet, which had also attracted Louis' gaze, examining its soft play of colour, pink, ivory, green, red, on a dark blue ground, its trees, bent twigs, leaves, buds, blossoms, fruit — truth to tell her poor eyes saw only this and passed the moments of obedient waiting lost in this pleasant reverie.

There was a soft knock at the door. Charlotte merely nodded, as if the stranger outside could hear her weary movement and interpret it as a sign to enter; as indeed he did, for the door opened immediately. The Queen looked up with an expression of sudden anxiety. A thin man with red hair going slightly grey and pale sharp features stepped in and bowed low. Quickly drawing himself up again he came forward with the assurance of a man who bears an important message. Two steps away from the seated figure he stopped and looked at her with perfect composure.

He has his eyes, she thought, strangely stirred by the discovery. But they do not offend me. Whereupon she grew calmer.

"I am listening, sir," she said simply.

Oliver gave a slight bow and passed his hand over his brow and temples. At heart he was not as confident as he seemed. The King's exhausted face, which he had just seen, and his "I cannot," which he had just heard, had upset him. Anne too had fallen ill without having had recourse to the Florentine phial,

fallen ill with symptoms which had filled him with the darkest suspicions. Had he underestimated the power of the attachment which Louis had taken from him or had himself created? Or worse still, urged on by unconscious desire, had he after all underestimated this attachment, because he was thirsting for revenge? Was the human soul so strong that although he had surrendered his own and given it to another, it still continued to play a part in Louis' fate? Had he been taken out of himself and overpowered and absorbed as a human being, while still against his will remaining the stronger power in the life of another? Above all, could he detect in himself the smallest desire that things should or should not be as they were? He had shaken his head when he left the King. All these questions were useless and possibly harmful, for they lured his thoughts to the past and hid the danger of his memories of himself. — And who was Oliver? — Outside the door of the Queen's room he smiled: Oliver is the King.

"My task is not easy," he began in calm friendly tones. "But yours is indeed difficult, gracious lady. You must not look upon me as a stranger, but as the mouthpiece of our exalted master. As one who stands close beside him I am able to utter momentous truths in his name and yet I am remote enough from him to express without shame to your illustrious person those deepest and most secret things from which His Majesty recoils. Look upon me as a physician before whom even chastity may expose her form unveiled."

"I do not regard you as a stranger," she replied gently with a smile of embarrassment, "but neither am I in need of a physician, sir."

"It is not always possible to know that," he replied gravely. "Moreover there are also physicians of the soul, who deal with relations between man and man. I speak for your royal husband with knowledge and authority as his confidant. Does your marriage stand in no need of a physician, gracious lady?"

Charlotte had grown very pale and her cheeks quivered with suppressed anxiety. She twisted her fingers together and slowly shook her head in despair.

"I do not know," she said, in an altered voice, "and I doubt whether any physician could mend my marriage. But, sir," she added more firmly and with a certain haughtiness,

"because I believe you do not wish to offend me, I give you this answer, and show that I trust you. You may speak freely."

Necker, looking her up and down, saw the effect of his gaze in the anxious widening of her pupils.

"I thank you, Madam," he said slowly. "You make my task easy, for you have yourself determined that I should not be driven to subterfuge. If you had given expression to the smallest hope, I should have been obliged to say that the King, for reasons of sentiment, wished to try to resume his married life. This, as you have already signified, would have been a lie or an offence."

"Sir," cried the Queen uneasily, "what would you have me understand?"

"The truth," Necker answered without hesitation, "and your duty, both of which are ever hard and unaccommodating. If a creature of no importance might be allowed to protest with a play of petty sentiment against the decision I have to communicate to your Majesty, you, on the other hand, are in duty bound to recognise the royal purpose. Exalted lady, the truth is — the King is thinking not of you but of the dynasty."

Charlotte sprang up.

"And his decision?" she cried in a paroxysm of fear.

"This very night he will pray both God and you to give him a son," said Oliver in a calm clear voice.

The Queen suddenly raised her hand and showed her teeth as though she were about to exclaim "No!" But she controlled herself, held in check by Necker's look, and slowly resumed her seat, keeping her eyes wide open upon him. Thus she remained sitting stiffly on the edge of the chair, in her confusion mechanically rearranging the folds of her gown without turning her face away from him.

"Duke Charles is the heir to the throne," she said in altered tones, her voice a little husky yet distinct. "Therefore His Majesty must be aware that his brother will not survive him? You need not answer that question, sir. I know all too well how he deals with the destinies of men's lives. I know now . . . I know all now, I recognise his methods. . . ."

She was silent for a moment, smiling wearily. Then she murmured:

"But there is yet another thing, sir. I am worn out. I repel

him. . . . But no, why should I care? — let him come — or let him tell me where to go, and I will go. But he must not offend me. He must not stare at me again like that. Surely he knows what I am like! Perhaps he can also guess what life has been to me."

"Let me kiss your hands, your Majesty," begged Oliver.

THE King dined alone. Even Tristan and Jean de Beaune, who usually kept him company at table, had to keep their distance. Even Oliver, who waited on him, had to stand behind him. His horror of the coming night made him dread the sight of any face. He ate quickly in silence, partaking of highly seasoned dishes, of game prepared with vinegar and sauces, and drinking stimulating spiced wines and exciting auriferous liqueurs. He drank fast and deep. Necker could see only his puny back, which he occasionally shook, and, now and again when he stooped quickly to replenish a plate or a goblet, his coarse hard profile, in which the eye was closed. After he had finished eating, he sat for a long time with his arms outstretched across the table, his neck bent stiffly forward, drinking heavily. Suddenly he sprang up, thrusting back his heavy chair so violently that Oliver was forced to catch it. He turned his evil face towards him.

"Where are you sleeping?" he asked sharply.

"Where I have most often slept of late," replied Oliver calmly, "in the room beside your Majesty's own chamber."

The King strode quickly up to him and grasped his wrist.

"Do not go to her, Oliver," he implored.

"She is ill," said Necker coldly.

Louis released him for a moment and then exerting all his strength grasped his arms:

"Have you given her," he cried, in suppressed horror, "Oliver, have you given her . . ."

Necker looked into his eyes and braced himself to endure the pain of his grip.

"She did it herself, to make things easy for you, Sire."

The King raised his hand and gave a strange smile, his eyes looking vacantly into space.

"What courage!" he murmured, and hurried away.

Oliver looked after him and gravely shook his head. "It is not courage, I fear, it is weariness both in her and in him. There

is not much courage between them." He shrugged his shoulders sceptically and clapped his hands to summon the pages to clear the table. Slowly he went to his room with the painful feeling that sleep would not come to him quickly that night. The thought of the three people whom he had forced together and driven asunder kept insistently recurring to his mind and would not be driven away. The solitude of the passage along which he was walking brought him back to himself. Why am I doing all this? he asked himself. Then quickly came the old question, Who then is Oliver? But once more he shook his head. He had no wish to be the King now; he had no wish to be Necker. Not to be were best — sleep, death. But the one was as hard as the other to secure. *Le Mauvais!* The evil one! Surely the world did not give a man such names for nothing? Consciousness of evil never sleeps and never dies. Pray? There were crucifixes at every corner and on every door. Prayer could not be as difficult as sleeping or dying. What could he pray for and who would listen to him? He who questions cannot pray. God in eternity was the contrary of questioning. One thing would do him good — to look on the face of somebody good. Anne used to be good. Whose fault was it that she was no longer good? To look at a child. That would do him good. But in this villainous stone structure there were no children.

For a moment he felt so weak and low that he longed to see Jean de Beaune's good-natured face and to hear his earthly laugh, and he suddenly stopped short on the point of going back to him. But smothering his distress, thrusting it from him with the fists of his earthly body, he laughed at himself and, quickly stopping his ears so as not hear the hideous echo, strode hurriedly on — in a moment he was in his own room. The quiet bed, the quiet books, the warm and cheerful light of the candles did him good. He did not undress, but reaching out for his Lucan, whom he loved, read the clear cut, cold and somewhat stilted verses of his *Pharsalia*.

Half an hour later he heard footsteps approaching his door — Daniel Bart's long, powerful strides. He thrust the manuscript aside. He was not surprised that some one should come to him that night, nor was he frightened. It won't be the last disturbance I shall have, he thought; that is why I am here.

"Come in, Daniel," he cried, before the man could knock. Bart stepped in. His face was anxious and showed that he had not slept.

"Yes, it is I," he said, somewhat taken aback.

"Does Mistress Necker want me?" Oliver enquired indifferently, reaching out for his folios. "I hope she is better?"

He did not look at the servant. He expected him to say "No," to tell him a dreadful piece of news, the very worst perhaps. Anything could happen that night. But Daniel said "Yes," shortly and with evident reluctance.

Oliver turned over the leaves of the book, reading a line here and there, apparently oblivious of his presence.

"Master," Bart exclaimed, "look at me and ask me more questions, or hear what I have to say. When at such an hour as this I come from the bedside of a sick woman, surely there is no need to be ashamed of showing some slight anxiety?"

Oliver in obedience to his call looked up. "All right, all right," he said with a smile. "But you surely told me she was better, so the antidote must have worked."

"Yes," Daniel replied impatiently, "at least she is no longer delirious. But you can find out her condition for yourself. She wishes to speak to you most urgently. Something is distressing her. Come with me at once, Master."

Oliver did not stir.

"I am on duty," he replied with some hesitation.

"You are on duty?" Bart exclaimed in astonishment. "Here in your room, with your books! And even if you were on duty, could you deny the mistress this wish? And even if the King said no, and you wished . . ."

"The King has forbidden me to leave this room," Oliver interposed.

"But if you wish to," Daniel cried excitedly, "would that prevent you? I have been serving you for fifteen years, Master, and I know when you do not wish to do a thing! — If I may say so, sir, you make me feel ashamed of you. . . ."

He turned round and made as if to go. Necker sprang up and cried:

"The Devil take you! If I do not want what you want, what on earth is the good of that gigantic lump of a body of

yours, with its massive shoulders? Are you afraid that I am stronger than you?"

Bart, stiff with astonishment, stared at him for a moment without grasping his meaning. Then a broad grin broke over his face and, seizing Necker silently by the shoulders and forcing him as the weaker of the two to bend his knees, he lifted him up and carried him out of the room like a child.

Anne, with a pale, almost transparent, face, was lying back on her pillows. The fever was still burning in her eyes, but the alternating hot and cold fits no longer shook her frame. Oliver stepped up to the bed and put his fingers on her pulse.

"Good, good," he said unsympathetically; "but you know his foolish jealousy, Anne. Why do you make me come to you at such an hour? There is no doing anything with him to-day."

"I know him," she said very softly, allowing her eyes to dwell on him, "and that is why I asked you to come, Oliver. You ought to be kinder to me, Oliver. . . ."

Necker bowed his head, weakened and bewildered by her large dark-grey eyes.

"He is with her now," she murmured after a while — and it seemed to him, for he dared not look at her, as though she were speaking from a distance, from the other side of the wall.

"Yes," he murmured. And then he heard:

"He — can — not. . . . He loves me . . . only me. . . ."

Oliver looked up quickly as though he were forced to do so; it was as if a soft strong hand had raised his chin. And he saw her old smile, the magic smile of Anne. In the sunny glow of that smile he saw his old love, his magic love for Anne, and his heart was so torn that he cried out in confusion:

"Who, Anne?"

Or perhaps he did not cry out, for the cry was in his heart, and she did not answer it, but only said:

"Shall I help, Oliver? I know I can help. . . ."

Necker pressed his fists against his throbbing temples. Help whom? Help whom? And then he repeated aloud:

"Help whom, Anne?"

And this time she heard it, for she replied:

"The King, and with him yourself, Oliver. Why do you ask?"

Why do I ask? Why do I ask? he groaned to himself. Why do I wish to know what I know already? Why indeed do I ask?

"Anne, Anne, are he and I one?"

Or he had not asked that question; for she was silent, her chin quivered, her teeth chattered softly, and in her eyes he saw tears. The glorious radiance of her smile had died away. — Necker saw only her sick face.

"Why did you do it, Anne?" he asked gently.

She moved her hands uneasily; her weary brain could no longer follow the harried rush of her thoughts. She saw that he was deeply moved, but she no longer knew whether it gave her joy or pain. At that moment she did not even know why he was standing by her bed, or what she had been doing during the hours that had just gone by. She answered in muffled tones:

"I don't quite know what you mean, Oliver; I have done so much in the last few days."

"Why have you made yourself ill?" he said slowly, distressed by the sweetness of her confession. "Why did you poison yourself, Anne? The powder is a strong poison unless you know the proper dose."

Anne gave him a sidelong glance and tried to smile.

"Can't you believe me, Oliver, even when I beg you to? Can't you believe me when I tell you that I have been ill just as anybody might be ill?"

Necker shook his head and passed a hand quickly over her perspiring brow.

"I cannot believe that," he said, "for in addition to other things the phial showed that ignorant fingers had tampered with it. No, I will not believe that, Anne; for I cannot make light of life at your expense."

Anne raised her head a little and opening her eyes wide, glanced up at him, but dropped them again quickly.

"You see, Oliver," she said, as it were irrelevantly, "life is hard enough for you as it is, and I did not want it to be harder on account of me. I did not want you and him and the country to come to grief because of me. That is why I did it . . . it seemed easier for me to do it myself than for you to have done it."

She raised her brows, and her lips seemed to grow thinner. She had picked up the thread of events. Her face seemed to have a proud, almost ironical expression, which frightened him, for he had not yet recovered his hardness.

"It might not have been necessary, Anne," he replied. "There might have been no need for me to do it."

But she waved the suggestion aside with a quick decisive movement of her hands.

"Had it been necessary, you would have done it, Oliver," she said firmly, "for he can overcome the mere separation from me, but illness he cannot overcome!"

"And even if! And even if!" he persisted, allowing himself to be driven on almost voluptuously by his weakness. "It would have been different if I had done it, Anne. It would merely have been a slight correction of Fate, such as I have often carried out, an interference carefully weighed and limited in its results, and done in order to help him. . . ."

"Whom?" she interposed with eager expectation.

Oliver, in great agitation, suspected what was coming, but allowed himself to be driven on. — Or was it not weakness? He answered quickly, completing the strange circle her shattered soul had travelled:

"The King, and with him myself, Anne."

He looked at her, fully expecting her to put the next question which he felt certain she would put:

"Are you and he one?"

But she raised herself, thrusting her arms back into the pillows to support herself, and with a last feverish outburst of energy her eyes clung to him in hope and supplication, risking the crucial question:

"Oliver, Oliver, what is the King to me?" she cried.

He looked into her eyes and in his heart the tension of the last few hours snapped asunder, the last bonds binding her to him were torn away. That which only a moment ago he had thought was weakness — he knew it now — was cruel attraction and relenting, the tragic play of his demoniacal spirit. He looked at her, and with a faint cry she sank back into the pillows, conquered, lost.

"Who is Oliver," he muttered, "can you tell me that, Anne?"

She did not stir, she did not answer, nor did she cry. She lay white and cold, her lips blue, her chin thrust slightly forward. He leant over her.

"Louis' love for you, Anne — that is Oliver."

She opened her eyes again and looked into his face, which was close to hers. She felt his breath.

"If that is so, I must certainly help him," she said faintly, "and that is why I asked you to come."

A sudden thought struck her and she spoke more clearly.

"I wanted — there is only one thing I wanted to hear, that you had given him this pain because he had given you pain on account of me, Oliver. Now I know that if you had wished to tell me that, you would have been forced to lie. Will you lie to me, Oliver?"

"I cannot," said Oliver gravely, "not now. I might have been able to this evening perhaps."

"You would not have been able to, Oliver," she said, and shook her head from side to side on the pillow. "I know you would not have lied, just as I know you would have done that other thing — I mean, given me the fever. I interrupted you a moment ago about that. But I know what you were going to say. You are right, Oliver; for you it would have been merely a slight correction of Fate; for me it would have been very much more than that. But don't let us talk about that any more, I beg you, Oliver."

He nodded his head slowly. She was silent a moment, exhausted perhaps. Suddenly Necker thought he heard doors slamming; the castle no longer seemed to be buried in the silence of the grave. He became uneasy.

"Anne," he said, "I must —"

He stopped. She had raised her hand and was listening with her head slightly raised, and her eyes shut.

"I think he is coming," she whispered.

"Who?" cried Oliver in confusion, his eyes starting from his head with fright. He also heard sounds like footsteps.

"The King is coming, Oliver."

"Are you out of your senses?" he muttered. "He here? At such an hour? Past the guards? Then he is mad!"

The footsteps grew more distinct. Daniel in one of the ante-rooms seemed to be opening the door into the passage, probably to find out who was coming, and they heard his cry of astonishment.

"The King is coming," she said again and looked at the Master with a weary smile. "That is just what I wanted — to

speak to him, and for him to see me as I am now. Do you understand? I can do a great deal with him."

Louis' voice could be heard in the ante-room, hoarse and peevish.

"The devil take you, man, stay where you are! I know where I want to go!"

Anne whispered quickly:

"Go away soon, Oliver! And make sure that this very night, this very hour, you take her to his turret chamber. Do you understand?"

He nodded. His face seemed to have grown paler. The door was flung open. The King, fully dressed, his flushed face and violent movements revealing shame, anger and dismay, came quickly forward a few steps into the room. But when he saw Anne, with the weary faded look of a sick woman in bed, and close beside her Necker calm and collected, he stopped short. Then he smiled, a pained and tortured smile, and in his eyes there was still the shudder of a terrible experience.

"I — can — not — do — it . . ." he groaned, and let his hands fall loosely to his side. Oliver and Anne looked at him, the former with his dark compelling gaze, the latter softly as though she wanted to help. Louis started forward towards her, but, with a clumsy attempt at self-control, drew back and turned to Oliver.

"Forgive me, Oliver," he begged in a low voice, "I am a fool."

"I have nothing to forgive, Sire," Oliver replied calmly. "But I am sorry you should have shown yourself like this. Would it not have been better to send one of the guards to fetch me, rather than expose your royal person without an escort to the sentinels and the petty officials in this wing of the castle? Daniel Bart, my servant, summoned me urgently to come here. Mistress Necker had an attack of fever and he was frightened and would not be gainsaid."

He called out for Daniel. When he saw his distraught face, he smiled faintly.

"Tell His Majesty where you found me, and how you brought me here," he said.

Daniel Bart cleared his throat with some embarrassment.

"I found my master in his room," he stammered, "all alone, reading in his room. I told him that the mistress was very ill and wanted him. As he seemed doubtful about coming with me, I grew angry and carried him off. I thought —"

"All right, my man," Louis interrupted, and laughed a short forced laugh.

Bart withdrew.

"It is a terrible night," the King resumed, hunching his back as though he were frozen with cold. "I hardly know where I am, and when I could not find you, I ran here. Perhaps I am drunk after all."

He turned his head timidly towards Anne.

"Forgive me, madam. It grieves me to see you in this plight."

He spoke very gently and was struggling to maintain his composure. He saw her smile and stretch out her hand to him. He went quickly to the bed.

"Anne . . ." he groaned, "have you — for my sake . . ."

He stopped, white with fear. Looking back over his shoulder he saw that Necker had vanished.

"Oliver . . . has he gone?" he asked uneasily and pressed her hand.

"He has gone," she said reassuringly, and smiling at him as though she were his mother; "perhaps he is waiting for you in the tower, Sire."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked her hand. Her eyes were calm and beautiful as he looked at her.

"Did he tell you to do this, Anne?" he asked.

"No, I did it myself, of my own free will."

The King leant forward a little.

"For my sake, Anne, or for his sake?"

"For you, and for him through you," she answered, with a troubled looked.

And then he asked:

"Anne, Anne, are he and I one?"

Her heart gave way within her and she shut her eyes. This oft repeated question wore her out. The pitiless circle which for the second time on this fatal night had been drawn about her seemed to hold her in a vice. She sighed heavily.

"But it is true, Anne; it is true!" he whispered

mysteriously; "we are one! But he rages in me; do you not feel it? He makes me suffer, it is suffering. . . ."

With a sudden outburst of fear he clasped her arm.

"Anne, Anne, does he mean to punish us with all this? Is our sin so very terrible, Anne?"

"I do not know . . ." she gasped, turning her face away with an expression of unutterable weariness. Overcome with terror, he fell on his knees beside the bed.

"Anne, Anne, will you . . . will you still be mine? Does he want you to die? . . ."

"I don't know . . . I don't know . . ."

As he remained silent for a long time and did not stir and his hands grew cold on her arm, she turned once more towards him. He had buried his face in the bed clothes; all she saw was his grey hair; she touched it lightly with her fingers. She was calm now.

"I wish I could help you, Sire."

He looked up pale and old.

"Do you?" he said in some confusion. She passed her hand lightly over his brow and eyes. He smiled. She spoke in a low sweet voice which stole soft as silver over his senses.

"Let my hand rest on your eyes and think . . . and think of me in our turret chamber . . ."

He twitched convulsively. She bent quickly over him and her lips touched his face, as she whispered over his skin:

"Perhaps I shall be there, perhaps I shall have no lamps burning, perhaps I should like only the belief that I am there, to be there. . . . Now go and believe in the good lie! It must be so. . . . Don't you see, friend, if you but wish it, I shall be the one who will be there. . . . Go!"

She released him and smiled. He looked at her with wide-open eyes as though he were gazing on a miracle.

"Anne," he said very softly and slowly, "my darling wife, God can also be in a lie. I will try it, I will take you with me in my senses, and God have mercy on our wretched souls!"

He kissed her on the brow and went. She waited until his footsteps had died away and no sound broke the silence about her. Then raising herself and overcoming her weakness and giddiness, she got out of bed and reeling a little went to a small cupboard in the wall.

"He did not lock it," she said with a smile, and took out the phial.

"He did not take it away. He knows that it is best for me . . . without him. . . ."

She shook a little of the yellow powder into a goblet of wine and drank.

"What is Anne to him? . . ."

Chapter 4

THE HEADS

THE QUEEN remained at the castle a week. Gentle and obedient, her shoulders constantly hunched in timidity, she had gone to and fro to the dark, heavily scented turret chamber, her eyes full of the horror of one in a nightmare. All day long there had rung in her ears the painful echo of the strange name she had heard repeated there, while her mind had been filled with good-natured doubts regarding the black magic of the terrible nights that had followed upon the first and most cruel of them all. Except for her ladies-in-waiting, she had seen only the strange messenger and guide, whom, as her ladies secretly assured her, everybody called the Devil, but whom she found both kind and good, full of tender solicitude and encouragement, and reassuring with his warm and friendly eyes. One day he informed her that the King had gone to Tours, and regretted that he had not been able to bid her farewell. After which he escorted her back to her own residence.

When Louis once more sat with him in the royal study, neither of them referred to what had happened. The pressing business of state and the various political events that had to be considered found the King as clear-headed, energetic and gifted as ever. It was only when they left the tower at night — and they always did so together, for there was no one waiting above their heads now — and Necker bolted the door that the King repeated every night the same words:

“Anne does not get any better?”

He always spoke calmly and slowly, as though he were resigned, and his voice was free from all reproach. But Oliver never answered him, nor did he make any attempt to discover how, after such a paroxysm of passion, he was able to summon the strength for such resignation, or whether his state of apparent equanimity was likely to endure. He referred to his wife as seldom as he had done in the past, when, although he knew she was waiting above his head, he pretended to be deaf and

blind and did not acknowledge her presence in the tower. But he instructed Daniel Bart to give the King news of her every day.

Anne did not get well. After the attacks of delirium which had occurred at short intervals during Charlotte's stay in Amboise, there had been a temporary collapse of strength accompanied by much pain and inflammation in the region of the spleen, and this had been followed by an acute intermittent fever. At regular intervals her body was racked with hot and cold fits, only to relapse into a state of complete apathy. The antidotes which Oliver concocted for her had hardly any effect, and the Master suspected that, as a rule, she did not even take them. He never hinted at his suspicions, however, but kept his word, and, during the course of his rare visits, did not appear to doubt that her illness was due to natural causes. Very soon he discovered that her heart was becoming affected. He had expected this, for he was well aware of the slow, irresistible action of the Florentine poison in decomposing the blood, and knew that it could no longer be neutralised. He knew better than she did how long the body would hold out. Daniel Bart, who nursed her with both skill and devotion, was instructed by his master to do no more than allay the worst effects of her attacks, her pain and her sleeplessness, and to see that she took the prescribed doses of the secret remedies, which, as an adept in Florentine medical science, he had distilled from poppy heads and gentian root. Thus Bart gradually succeeded in making her decline at least peaceful and painless, and alleviated the effects of her condition. The poor fellow, who mistook this alleviation of her symptoms for the first signs of recovery, began to put so much hope into his daily reports to the King, and so much praise of Oliver's skill — a way of expressing his concern about the invalid, which was deeper than it appeared — that one evening Louis altered the usual form of his question and asked:

“Is Anne getting better, Oliver?”

Necker stepped a few paces behind him and did not answer at once. The King's slender back, so pitifully bowed beneath his load of care, suddenly reminded Necker of that infernal evening when Louis had ascribed to him alone the affect of the various dishes and drinks of which he had partaken. Nevertheless,

though provoked by his outward calm, he stifled his pity and gave the strange reply:

"If you are still suffering, Sire, I would say, perhaps."

Turning sharply round, Louis gazed at him in surprise.

"How can you know? How can you know whether I am suffering, Oliver?"

Necker hesitated a moment, scanning the King's features, which, in the light of the torch looked pale, agitated and sad. Then he said:

"Perhaps, Sire, she is getting better."

THE Grand Master's operations in the south were swiftly crowned with success. His splendidly equipped and disciplined troops easily routed the disorganised bands led by Armagnac and Nemours, and his losses were but slight. As the original object of the two rebel leaders had been to close up the ring of the new League against Louis in the south, they were isolated at one blow by the King's political tactics, and surprised by his unexpected military offensive. They heard of his investiture of their ally, Charles of France, with the neighbouring Duchy of Guienne only when the royal troops had already forced a wedge between them; and, in a few weeks, the Grand Master declared their estates confiscate, and at the same time continued his operations against Armagnac in the extreme south and against Nemours in Quercy and Auvergne. The Count took refuge in a stronghold of Gascony, and Nemours in the rocky regions of Carlat near Aurillac. Both offered to negotiate, and the Grand Master sent to the King for instructions.

As Armagnac had not been among those who had been pardoned for belonging to the first League, and, on account of his personal wealth, the position of his struggling estates, and his alliance with Juan of Aragon, had maintained his independence, the King was content to have the head of Nemours only. But in order to be rid of him, and confiscate his estates to the Crown, Tristan declared that Armagnac must be brought to trial.

"Do you imagine," the King enquired scoffing, "that I intend to leave him his estates or to rehabilitate him? But I don't want all these trials, Tristan. If I make examples of people, they must, in order to be effective, be few in number. Over Nemours, my friend, and later on with St. Pol, you can make as

much display and judicial fuss as you please. But the Count is an honourable foe."

Oliver interposed playfully:

"It seems to me that a hero's death is the appropriate fate for him."

Louis glanced at him in surprise and then smiled.

"Is conscience meeting me half way?" he enquired gently. Necker leant towards him and whispered in his ear:

"You have earned many concessions from conscience, Sire."

"If they are ready to treat," Jean de Beaune objected, "this surely puts hostile action out of court. Armagnac may wish to capitulate."

Louis nodded cheerfully at him.

"All your sweet soul lacks," he said with a laugh, "is ordination, and your head, the tonsure. And then you would be a priest with all the humility of a Franciscan friar, Jean. But who can cope with the terrible vicissitudes and cruelties of war? Remember, my friend, that if Armagnac wishes to negotiate, he must, willy nilly, present himself at the headquarters of my Grand Master. And then no permit or safe conduct can protect him from a stray shot, or any other unlucky accident. And if he capitulates and his stronghold is occupied by our troops, how easy it is in spite of every precaution for some other misfortune to overtake him. In which case my Grand Master would of course express my regrets in fitting manner, on my behalf, and free me from all trace of hostility."

Ten of the most reliable sharpshooters among the Scottish Archers were commanded to accompany the courier back to the Grand Master, and were entrusted with special duties. Dam-martin could now formulate his demands in the name of the King, and these were: the unconditional surrender of the Count, in consideration of which he was to be given a written guarantee of pardon from the King, who promised to welcome him in Amboise as a worthy vassal. Armagnac accepted the conditions. But when the royal troops took possession of the fortress, one of the men of the Count's bodyguard was somehow or other wounded by a halberdier. A tumult ensued, shots were fired, and, as Armagnac hastened to the scene, he was shot dead with a bullet through his head. The Grand Master issued a

Proclamation, announcing to the people the sad death of the reigning Count, and the annexation of his estates by the Crown.

The King, who had originally intended to secure the person of the Duke of Nemours also by illicit means, yielded to the judicial fears of his Provost, who did not wish the trial to start under the cloud of an illegal act. Thus, in accordance with his instructions, the seneschal of La Rouergue summoned the Duke of Nemours to surrender, and place himself at the disposal of the Promotor of the Parliamentary Justices of Paris. But Nemours, who was well aware that they would have some difficulty in capturing his stronghold in the rocks, had only declared himself ready to negotiate because his wife, who had taken flight with him, was on the eve of being confined. The terms the King offered, which made no attempt at concealing the nature of the fate awaiting him, forced him to resist. He therefore broke off negotiations, and asked for a safe conduct for the Duchess alone, in the hope of being able to hold out for some time, owing to the fact that the besiegers were badly equipped with artillery, and that he imagined the bulk of Dammartin's forces were still being held in check by Armagnac in the south.

Louis, whose joy at the death of his other enemy was somewhat marred by the news of Nemours' resistance, remarked sharply to the Provost:

"It looks as if we were both growing old, my friend. You are running to seed in a welter of pedantic formalities which cost me both time and men, while I am sinking into a decline full of easy-going complaisance."

Tristan shrugged his shoulders and was silent. But, in spite of the King's angry speech, Jean de Beaune ventured, towards the end of the discussion, to ask the question that was troubling him.

"But surely, Sire," he said, "you will have the humanity to grant Nemours' request and allow the Duchess to go in safety with her women and children to Aurillac?"

The King thumped the table impatiently with his fist.

"Now the philanthropist is hanging on to my other leg!" he blustered. "No, my sweet evangelist, I shall do no such thing! For the expectations of my lady of Anjou and Nemours lead me to hope that she will soon get on the Duke's nerves, and make him weak and desperate. The King may sometimes be allowed to lack humanity. . . ."

Suddenly he stopped, as if terrified at what he had said, and turned hesitatingly towards Oliver, who was standing behind him, gravely gazing at him.

"Did you speak, Oliver?" he enquired uneasily. "Do you not agree with me?"

Oliver gave a faint smile.

"You are right, Sire," he replied. "There are times when the King must forget his own acts of humanity. They might end in undermining his strength."

Louis turned away, and shrugged his shoulders in confusion. Necker leant over and whispered in his ear:

"Is not conscience silent now, Sire, because you are silent?"

The King stood up and with a determined wave of his hand said:

"I am no human monster, Jean — or not always; you observe I have been weighing the matter again. But in my opinion the lives of my people are worth an act of brutality. Even expectant mothers can be a source of danger in our rear. They can appeal for help and summon assistance. This lady, when once she is in Aurillac, can call Aragon, my brother Charles and Burgundy to arms: No!"

With the bulk of his army released through Armagnac's death, the Grand Master advanced by forced marches on Carlat, taking his siege artillery with him. On the second day of the bombardment the Duchess was prematurely delivered and died a few hours later, as the result of a difficult confinement, inadequate attention, and the many shocks she had received. Nemours, prostrated with grief, surrendered, and was immediately handed over to the officers of the law. He was on the point of being taken north, when an express messenger arrived from the King with the command that he should be set free to attend the solemn obsequies of the Duchess, attended with all the honours due to his rank.

As he was sealing this order, the King turned with a smile to Necker and said to him:

"You see I am endeavouring to pay back at least the hush money, brother."

Oliver, dumb with emotion and a sense of his own worth, nodded, and Louis added:

"Conscience may speak again if it likes and if it is necessary. I have no wish to incur any fresh guilt, my friend."

Nemours, silent and dignified in his sorrow, followed the Duchess to her grave. He went as a free man, arrayed in the full insignia of his high rank, and the Grand Master and the Seneschal stood respectfully by. He even presided at the funeral banquet. Then, without saying a word, he handed Count Dammartin his sword, and the Seneschal his ducal seal; the two gentlemen bowed silently and departed. The next moment the Parliamentary Promotor in his black robes entered the room, followed by ten officers of the Supreme Court, and again put the handcuffs on his wrists.

He was first taken to Lyons, where Tristan l'Hermite was awaiting him, and subjected to a preliminary examination. Without entering into the details of the charge, Nemours repudiated the competence of the Parliament to try his case, and demanded to be allowed to appear before the House of Peers. The Provost, who had expected this objection, broke off the proceedings, and took the prisoner to the Bastille in Paris. The King appointed a special court to try him, consisting of seventeen nobles and seventeen members of the Parliament, whose qualifications consisted either in their personal hostility to Nemours, or in their readiness to comply with their sovereign's wishes in regard to the sentence — wishes which he took but small pains to conceal. Bourbon, representing the nobles, and President Le Boulanger, representing the Parliament, alternately acted as presidents of the Court, while l'Hermite, on behalf of the peers, conducted the charge of *lèse majesté*, and the Promotor of the Supreme Court the charge of high treason. The trial lasted six weeks, and was the occasion for a prodigious display of petifogging formalities. But Nemours defended himself with prudence and skill and turned the public nature of the trial to good account. He pleaded that he was guilty only of insubordination for refusing to surrender at the King's command — an offence which was to be explained on the ground that he was being attacked, and was not to be regarded as a wilful flouting of the royal authority. He contested the charge of high treason, knowing full well that, for political reasons, the King would hesitate to compromise Burgundy, Charles of France, and the Constable, by producing the incriminating evidence.

As the Court did not dare to decide whether torture should be applied or not, the Provost Marshal returned to Amboise to

learn the King's wishes. Louis was anxious to avoid the necessity of examining the Cardinal and also of producing Oliver as witness.

"Threaten him with torture," he commanded. "Perhaps that will suffice."

Provost Tristan hastened back. The prisoner was examined in the torture chamber, in full view of the instruments, which the executioner's men were making ready, sharpening and heating. Nemours, however, did not flinch. Once again l'Hermite repaired to Amboise, and once again the King took counsel of his three friends. It surprised Necker that Louis should spare the time for all this discussion, and that he did not, with his customary hardness, order the distressing procedure to begin forthwith. Does he wish to catch me and lull me to sleep with his forbearance, he asked himself; or do I, does humanity really play such an important part in his heart? He tested him:

"If you badly need his confession, Sire," he said, "then surely no other course lies open to you?"

Louis looked at him thoughtfully.

"Why should I torture a man when all the while I know that in the end I shall condemn him?" he asked. And then, with a smile, and putting his head closer to Oliver's, he added in a whisper: "Or did you imagine that, at a word from you, I would apply the thumbscrews and drive the irons under his fingernails? After all, we don't act quite as obviously as that, Oliver!"

Necker bowed his head. Am I still myself, or is he myself once more? he enquired uneasily of his soul. Then he resolved to be honest with the King.

"Good, Sire," he said, "but that only proves that you do not badly need his confession." Then turning to the Provost, he added: "It will not give you much difficulty, will it, Sieur Tristan, to infer *lèse majesté* from the fact of his having taken up arms and rebelled, which is admitted and proven? And this crime calls for sentence of death from the Court, does it not?"

"That will be pronounced in any case," replied the Provost.

"Well then, Sire," Oliver continued, "allow the charge of high treason to drop. This course, besides being politically sound and serving our purpose, will not modify the ultimate issue; for after all Nemours has but one head?"

Bourbon, on behalf of the Court and the King, acquitted Jacques, Duke of Nemours, of the crime of high treason, but found him guilty of lèse majesté and condemned him to death. The prisoner's petition for mercy, which, on the day after sentence was passed, was laid before the King, together with the findings of the Court, was so stirring in its simplicity and power that Le Boulanger, the President, the seventeen members of the Parliament, and five of the more upright of the nobles overcame their fear of displeasing the King, and supported Nemours' application in a separate petition.

The Provost waited day after day for the King's signature, but for some unaccountable reason it was not given. The first time he ventured to remind Louis of the matter, he was met only with excuses; but when he pressed for a decision, Louis declared harshly that there was no law compelling the sovereign to sign a sentence within a certain space of time, adding that the Court would have to exercise the patience which he had often demanded of it before.

Thus two weeks went by in unwonted inaction. Nemours, the judges, the Court, and the whole country waited for the signature which meant either life or death, for the heavy, long characters of the royal name, the fatal *Loys*, beneath either the death warrant or the deed of mercy. At the end of the first forty-eight hours everyone, excited by expectations of the improbable, ventured to believe with ever growing conviction that the King was actually seriously considering a pardon. He whose habit it was to sanction sentence of death on a political offender within the space of a few hours, now required days, a whole week, two weeks, to make up his mind. Could the King be intending to exercise mercy?

The astonishment and tense excitement of his people passed apparently unheeded by Louis. He had taken charge of the documents himself, and neither showed them nor discussed them with anyone, not even with Oliver. And Necker, following the secret promptings of his heart, did not question him or press any advice upon him. But on one of these days of suspense, when the King, as was his wont at bedtime, mentioned Anne, Oliver said:

"Should you like to see her, Sire?"

Louis suddenly stood still.

"Do you wish to give me my reward, Oliver?" he said; "and so soon?"

"I do not think you are corruptible, Sire!" Oliver replied gravely. "Neither am I."

Oliver arranged that the guards along the passages through which they would have to pass were relieved of their duty for an hour, and then he and the King went to Anne. She was sitting fully dressed in an arm-chair; her cheeks were faintly coloured, her eyes shone without being clear, and while the skin of her face looked fresh, that of her hands was yellow and transparent. She smiled. But Louis remained sad and sorrowful. He said a few friendly words, enquired after her health, and was given hopeful replies. Then he was silent once more, and his shoulders quivered slightly. After a while he said gently:

"You have made your face up for me, madam, which shows how kind you are. Or did you tell her to do it, Oliver?"

Oliver glanced at him, and without hesitation answered "Yes." Anne smiled faintly.

"What a pity you can see it, Sire," she said. "Why did you see it?"

Louis bowed his head.

"Because it is not meant for me, but for my conscience," he replied with bated breath, "and because I am not corruptible."

Then, looking up at Oliver, he continued in agitated tones:

"I am not good, brother; I only lean on you for support when I am tired or when I am lazy, and often you bring me to my senses."

Necker smiled his cryptic smile.

"I often have to do so, Sire, to prevent myself from growing tired and lazy." Then, lowering his voice, he added: "If both of us were to fall asleep, there would be no one to lean upon." Then, more softly still: "Assuredly we are not yet good, Sire, because we would fain give our conscience a little pleasure. So we are nothing more than smug or coquettish — and that is even cheaper still."

The King flushed and twisted his fingers together so that his knuckles cracked.

"You are frank, my friend," he said with some embarrassment, "and you are vigilant. You do not let go of me. Truth to

tell, I myself knew nothing of all this; I know it now for the first time. I pretended all manner of things to myself, even my inclination to the spirit of mercy. I am known to be a good comedian. But in this respect I seem to have over-estimated my powers, which is surely rare for me. And, indeed, I found a certain pleasure in this. Now I see myself once more, stripped of my mask and buskins. You are often cruel and mysterious, brother."

Oliver raised a hand in protest.

"Why should I be so, Sire, or why do you believe that you are not so? What I mean is that we should not speak of each other as if we were opponents or opposites. I loved you when you suffered like a human being. Yet I do not grow cold when, as King, you deign to play with human suffering. Neither do I fear you when you are hard and deal out naught but pain. That is all, Sire. Therefore do not expect me to let go of you."

They were silent for a while.

"Do you imagine then that I do not suffer?" the King enquired at last. Oliver did not reply. With his eyes he gave Anne a command.

"Perhaps I shall get well again," she said; and Louis, deeply moved, turned to look at her.

"Forgive me, madam," he said in a choking voice, "but to-day your efforts to make me happy are not successful. But, believe me, I am grateful for your attempt." He raised his arms as if in pain. "Is the examination not over yet, Oliver?"

"Is it not doing you good, Sire?" Necker rejoined in kindly tones. "Does it not make the soul more free and unfettered? And if Anne had succeeded in giving you joy or robbing you of pain, I mean you, the man — if she now stood hale and hearty before you, then should you, the King, also like to give joy and steal away pain?"

Louis shook his head slowly and answered gravely:

"The King is not conscious of being bound by this human pleasure and pain. He knows as well as you, brother, that he is no mild ruler. At least, he knows it now."

Necker passed a hand over his brow and held his hand to his eyes for a moment.

After a while he said thoughtfully: "Now we will try our hand at giving joy to the King. Anne, see what you can do."

She looked up with a sweet smile.

"The Master begged me, Sire, to tell you the good news which he received to-day. The Queen is now certain that she is with child."

Louis bowed his head, his cheeks burned as if with shame, and in awkward haste he sprang to his feet.

"The King has indeed reason to be glad," he exclaimed.

Hastily taking leave of Anne, the two returned to the tower. Agitated and tongue-tied, Louis strode up and down the round room. Then, frowning darkly, he seated himself at his writing table, opened a secret drawer, and withdrew three documents, which he carefully unrolled and laid down side by side. He read them through again carefully; then picking up one of them, he exclaimed harshly:

"Nemours begs me to commute his sentence to one of banishment for life, and says he intends ending his days in a Carthusian monastery in Spain." He raised his head, and Oliver saw his profile, cold as marble. "He is forty-five," he continued brutally. "He can live a long while yet, long enough to change his mind, although in his dread of death he may perhaps be perfectly sincere in the promise he makes. But even Carthusian monasteries have doors, which permit of flight to Juan of Aragon! And if this head does not fall, not only will St. Pol's be more difficult to secure, but my brother Charles's face will grow less mournful. These are stern times, Oliver, and I must needs be as stern as the age."

So saying, he tore the petition in two, and picking up one of the remaining documents, rolled it up and threw it to Necker.

"Write the names of these people who support the petition down on the secret list — if we have not noted them already. For the moment no proceedings will be taken against them."

Then, spreading out the third document, he searched for his quill.

"The Provost must leave here to-night. The execution must take place within twenty-four hours of his arrival in Paris."

Oliver closed his eyes, and heard the quill scratch the four letters of the royal name heavily on the parchment. The King looked up.

"We and our Court will learn of the Queen's condition only after the execution. You will see to that, Oliver. The King

will only give expression to his joy in a week's time, so that no awkward association of ideas may be formed in the minds of the people in connection with the trial. Why are you looking at me like that, Oliver?"

On the day after Tristan's arrival in Paris, in the early hours of the morning, the two presidents of the special court repaired to the prisoner's cell and showed him the death sentence with the royal signature and seal. Nemours nodded, but said nothing. Two hours later, in the Parliament house, all the doors of which had been thrown open, the Provost Marshal promulgated the sentence. Nemours was beheaded at three o'clock in the afternoon, not in the open Place de Grève, however, but, in accordance with the King's command, in the judgment hall. At nightfall eight Franciscan friars, accompanied by forty torch bearers, came to take the head and body away.

The year was well and successfully employed, but the struggle with the man whose name came next on the roll of death was the most difficult of all. The Constable's head stuck stubbornly to his shoulders. This astute official, hearing the royal beast of prey prowling about his dwelling, began by flinging him substantial baits in the hope of either satiating or strangling him. In the King's name he occupied certain townships in the Somme area, which were under the suzerainty of Burgundy. But the beast was more shrewd than its tempter. It neither swallowed the bait nor spurned it; but held it between its teeth. Louis, who, with astonishing skill and secrecy, was keeping the Duke busy in the east, and seeing that his megalomaniac energies were employed in a conflict with the German Emperor, the Electors, the Duke of Lorraine and the Swiss, had no desire to recall his interest to the west, or to have war with him. For he knew that, owing to the proximity of Guienne, Brittany was beginning to stir again, and might become one of the links in a new League against him. The King, moreover, did not wish to return the Somme towns, for they had originally formed part of his domain, and for two years he had been trying to win them back. He therefore had recourse to his usual tactics. He informed the Duke that the towns had been occupied without his knowledge and contrary to his will, that he intended to advance in full force against the rebel and traitor, and would return the townships to Burgundy, provided the latter would

undertake to endorse the deed declaring St. Pol an outlaw, hand him over to France within eight days should he seek refuge with him, and, furthermore, make a declaration renouncing all interest in the persons of the Dukes of Brittany and Guienne. Burgundy, who distrusted any offer that came from the King, and who had no intention of allowing himself to be squeezed out of the political affairs of central France, hesitated before replying, more particularly as the Constable, who was informed by spies of the King's pretences, let him know that he would return the townships and place himself at the Duke's disposal if the latter would proceed to attack Louis. A little later on, moreover — after the execution of Nemours, and before the Grand Master had been despatched against him, just as he was preparing for his greatest blow, he urged his nephew, Edward, King of England, to invade France, and guaranteed to him, in addition to his own assistance, that of Burgundy, Brittany and Guienne. It will be remembered that after the pacification of his own country, Edward had been invited by both Burgundy and the League to undertake an expedition against France, and had long been making preparations for it. Edward did, indeed, land in Calais, which belonged to him, and brought with him a fairly large army. The weeks that followed were among those which imposed the severest strain on Louis' diplomatic genius. Nevertheless, they culminated in one of his greatest political triumphs. Edward, who, from the first, had not been particularly anxious to fight, and missed his London mistresses, not only found no allies awaiting him, but received no friendly welcome. Truth to tell, his sudden appearance threw Burgundy, whose troops were engaged in western Germany, into the utmost confusion. In the worst of tempers, he left his army and, quitting the Rhineland, hastened to meet Edward. Making his apologies, he nevertheless frankly informed him that he was not for the moment in a position to take active measures against the Valois. He also declared that he could do nothing for him except facilitate his march through Artois, leaving him to be supported by the Constable, who was apparently expecting his English friend. So saying, he handed him the letter in which the Constable promised to return the Somme towns, and a document in St. Pol's own handwriting, in which he solemnly promised to

serve and support the Duke and all his friends and allies, more especially the King of England, against all and sundry, whether living or dead, without exception. Accompanying this document was a sworn declaration to the King of England in which particular emphasis was laid on his readiness to help and support an invading army against the King of France. This was the only source of help on which King Edward, disappointed in every other direction, could rely, and it was insignificant if not worthless; for when English envoys tried to make their way to St. Quentin, the supposed headquarters of the Constable, they were stopped on the frontier of Picardy by the Grand Master's troops, and courteously, without any sign of hostility, requested to turn back and leave French territory. Burgundy shrugged his shoulders, agreed with his English brother-in-law that St. Pol's behaviour was strange if not actually suspicious, and took his leave, as his presence was urgently required at the seat of war in Germany. Thus Edward, filled with acute misgivings, was once more alone. No news reached him either from Brittany or Guienne. Possibly the couriers from these provinces had been intercepted by the Valois, or possibly the news of Nemours' execution — which had spread far and wide before Edward landed, but had only just reached him and depressed him still more — had so paralysed the spirit of the French princes and so thoroughly convinced them of the force and power of Louis' will that they did not dare to stir. Indeed, Edward himself hardly knew how and where to move, particularly as winter was approaching; and it was at this juncture that his friend Thomas Montgomery frankly pointed to the short route across the restless waves of the channel in their rear.

But at this moment an unexpected visitor arrived. Louis of Valois sent an ambassador to Calais, bearing credentials in the name of *Sieur le Mauvais*, Count of Meulan. And this devilish Count, as Montgomery straightway dubbed him, owing to his curious name, his red hair, and the bewildering glibness of his polyglot eloquence, did indeed discharge himself of a most curious mission. With the most plausible arguments, he proved to King Edward nothing more or less than that England's only true friend in Europe was His Most Christian Majesty King Louis. He challenged Edward to name a single

occasion during his reign when the King had been guilty of the smallest act of unfriendliness towards either England or the House of York, or had pursued any other policy than that of securing peace and amity between the two countries. Where then was the reason or the necessity for war? Moreover, a campaign undertaken in a foreign land and without allies at the beginning of winter, against a strong army in good fighting trim, was surely a most hazardous if not a quite hopeless undertaking. Did King Edward really wish to risk his army, his crown and his life, for the sole purpose of acting as cat's-paw for the Lords of Burgundy, Brittany and Guienne?

Edward interrupted him:

"I would ask your lordship," he said, "how the King knows that these gentlemen are not acting straightforwardly by me?"

Oliver smiled.

"Through His Majesty's Constable we have a fairly accurate knowledge of the present situation, and of your embarrassment, Sire. Were my royal master's intentions not as friendly as they are, the Grand Master might now be addressing you in my stead."

"And pray how do matters stand between the King and the Constable?" Edward enquired in great excitement.

"Very well, at present, Sire, unless you wish to undeceive him, as I would fain undeceive you with these proofs of the trustworthiness of the Duke of Burgundy and his friends," Oliver replied ambiguously. So saying, he laid before the King certain letters, skilfully forged at Amboise, purporting to show that a defensive alliance had been made between Burgundy, Brittany and Charles of France, against England.

The two Kings met in the neighbourhood of Amiens, and solemnly confirmed the treaty drafted by *Sieur le Mauvais*. The terms were: a nine years' truce, and the immediate withdrawal of the English troops in return for a sum of twenty thousand dollars (to be paid in cash before the troops marched off) by way of compensation for the expense of the expedition. Before bidding each other a friendly farewell, the two monarchs exchanged the following important documents — Edward gave Louis the papers dealing with the Constable's treaty with his allies, and his sworn declaration, together with a copy of the

letter in which the latter urged on the English expedition, and his communication to the Duke of Burgundy regarding the return of the Somme townships. Louis, on his side, gave his fellow sovereign a letter he had just received, from which it appeared that St. Pol offered to cut off the English King's retreat on Calais, and take him prisoner. And Louis requested Edward, on reaching London, to send this letter, or a copy of it, to his brother-in-law of Burgundy.

This document was not forged. Finding himself driven into a corner, St. Pol had gradually lost all capacity for calm and clear reflection, and had committed the terrible mistake of attempting to use the weapon of political intrigue against the King, who was a past master in the art. As soon as he knew that the King of England was isolated, he surrendered the Somme townships to the Grand Master without a struggle and wrote to Louis pointing out that he thereby gave proof positive that he was in no way connected with Edward, and could not be held responsible for the machinations of Burgundy, asserting that all the latter wanted, as they very well knew, was to get Edward to do his dirty work for him while he was otherwise engaged in Germany. He had no forces in Artois, and had lured his brother-in-law over with empty promises, whilst the Lords of Brittany and Guienne, who were members of the alliance, had not up to that moment sent any communication, far less a soldier, to Calais, even by sea. Wherefore, as a loyal subject, he begged leave to suggest that the Grand Master should take the offensive and drive the lethargic English monarch back into the sea, and promised to swell Dammartin's forces with his own regiments or cover his rear against Flanders. Louis replied to this letter by sending the Constable a courteous invitation to meet him at a Council of War in St. Quentin, but St. Pol took good care not to accept, and immediately moved the pick of his troops to the stronghold of Ham, whither he himself retreated from St. Quentin. When, some time later, his agents informed him of Oliver's mission, and of the meeting of the two sovereigns, he perpetrated his second blunder. Completely misunderstanding Louis' tactics and failing to appreciate the manner in which he had figured in the negotiations of the two monarchs, he wrote the letter which the Valois handed to Edward of York. The only reply he received was

the signing of the peace with England, and his public denunciation as an outlaw, which was endorsed by Burgundy as suzerain lord of Luxemburg, and the advance on Ham of troops from Roye and St. Quentin. St. Pol now lost both heart and head, and when two of his chief officers forsook him as an outlaw, and the remainder could no longer be trusted, he fled with a few servants to Mons in Hainault and threw himself upon the mercy and protection of Burgundy, who at the time was besieging Nancy. The Duke hesitated. It ran counter to his nobler instincts to deliver up an old friend to the gallows. But he was aware that since the King was free of anxiety concerning England and other troubles in his own realm, he might gladly seize upon violation of the decree passed against the Constable as a pretext for an advance into Flanders, then quite unprotected, or for interfering in Lorraine. And it was important for the Duke to hold Nancy, for it completed the unity of his vast realm, which extended from Holland to Savoy. Making all kinds of formal excuses, therefore, he stipulated that, before he could deliver up the Constable, the townships of the Somme must be restored to him as promised, and doubtless in so doing he was actuated by the hope that, having meanwhile captured Nancy, he would have troops at his disposal and be able to turn the situation to his advantage.

The King took counsel of his three friends, who, owing to the gravity of the political issues at stake, were in favour of redeeming the promise or of taking the Constable by force.

"I refuse on principle," declared Louis, "to give up anything of which I have once obtained possession. On the other hand, for the sake of this one head, I have no desire to make war on Burgundy; others are doing that for me."

"Then you must give up all hope of this one head," observed Provost Tristan, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I refuse on principle to give up all hope of any head," Louis rejoined sharply.

"If Nancy capitulates," said Jean de Beaune coldly, "it might please the Duke to shatter this principle of yours."

Louis glanced up with a crafty expression and pulled a grimace.

"To make sure that Nancy shall not capitulate before St. Pol is beheaded," he replied, "I have paid down twenty

thousand dollars. Campobasso, the Duke's Master of Ordnance, is on my private pensions list."

The two men looked at him in silent astonishment. Oliver was the first to speak:

"It seems to me we shall make no headway along these lines, Sire. And you would not like to adopt the other alternative — pretend to restore the Somme townships and then make some excuse for occupying them again after St. Pol has been handed over to us?"

"You would not like that alternative either, Oliver," the King replied uneasily, "for it, too, might lead to war or causes for war, and I should then have a load of guilt on my conscience which would make my task against Burgundy doubly difficult. But surely, my friend, I am not mistaken in gathering from your remarks that you are in favour of an honourable fulfilment of my promise?"

Oliver smiled.

"And in the end, Sire, might not even the honourable cession of the townships turn out to be quite fictitious?" he asked in reply. "For are we giving the Duke very much longer than five years? Are not his zealous confederates, the Duke of Lorraine and Campobasso, already digging his grave? I should be in favour of granting him very much more, Sire! Your generosity will but bring you in a higher rate of interest, the more you indulge it now. In addition to Luxemburg, which falls to him as a fief, give him all the Constable's estates and townships in Eastern Picardy, on the Aisne and in the Ardennes! Give him the whole of St. Pol's personal property. St. Pol's gold and your cousinly goodwill will rivet Burgundy to the east, where he will not soar but sink. Assure him of your benevolent neutrality in the matter of Lorraine! And your reward will be two heads — to-morrow one to cut off, and in a few years one that will roll to your feet!"

A few days later the Grand Master handed over the keys of the Somme townships to the Chancellor Crèvecœur, the Duke's lieutenant, who was in Péronne, and showed him the documents conferring St. Pol's property on the Duke, as soon as it should be confiscate, and guaranteeing him a free hand in Lorraine. These documents were handed over in exchange for the person of the Constable, whom Crèvecœur immediately

had conveyed to Péronne under a strong escort. At the same time he sent express messengers to inform the Duke of what had happened, and begged him to send instructions for the surrender of the Constable's person, which ought no longer to be denied. But, once again, Burgundy seemed to hesitate, and eight days elapsed without any news from him. And still Nancy did not capitulate. At last, the Grand Master forwarded an ultimatum from the King, announcing that unless St. Pol were handed over within a week, the Duke's infringement of the ban would be regarded as proven, and military action at once be taken against Péronne and for the relief of Nancy. Whereupon the Chancellor informed his master point blank that he would be constrained to resign his office and decline all responsibility for the future if these just demands were not met and instructions received within the limit of time specified. Forty-eight hours later he was handed the following strange reply from the Duke: "You are our lieutenant and representative of the executive power as long as we are in the field." On the same day, two hundred knights of Burgundy marched into Count Dammartin's headquarters, bringing the Constable with them. The Grand Master, with a grave but courteous greeting, asked St. Pol for his sword.

As St. Pol, in his capacity of commander-in-chief of His Majesty's forces, was not subject to the ordinary criminal jurisdiction of the realm, and could not be degraded until he had been sentenced, the Grand Master conveyed him unfettered to Paris as his personal prisoner. Throughout the journey not a word passed between them, and Dammartin hardly addressed even a member of his staff. The Constable sat silent and upright in the saddle, his face set, looking to neither left nor right. His eyes seemed riveted on his horse's ears. As the party approached the city from the south-east, and the massive walls of the Bastille, flanked by its two semi-circular towers, loomed above the Porte St. Martin, the Constable drew his hat down over his eyes, and pulled up the collar of his black coat. And thus, with his face concealed, he rode at Dammartin's side, through the gate and between the double row of soldiers to the fortress. At the gate of the Bastille, they were received with becoming solemnity by the Parliamentary President, his chief officials and councillors, the King's Provost Marshal and the

Governor of the city. The Grand Master seized the reins of his prisoner's horse; then, standing in his stirrups, he cried in a loud voice:

"My lords, and all here present, I would have you here behold Messire Louis of Luxemburg, Count of St. Pol, Constable of France. His person belongeth to the King, as will likewise his property, which through His Majesty will be handed over to my Lord of Burgundy, subject, that is, to your approval. That which the King bade me do and say have I done and said, and beg leave to tell you that I have promised to the Duke all his real and personal property, in accordance with His Majesty's written word and subject to your approval, and in exchange I received his person, which I have carefully watched and guarded, and which I now surrender to your exalted and incorruptible justice."

He drew St. Pol's horse so close to his own that their flanks almost touched, whereupon he embraced his prisoner and kissed him on both cheeks.

"May God keep you, brother," he said, and saluting the black-robed justices, he turned his horse away. The authorities of the law waited silent and motionless until the Grand Master and his suite had left the precincts of the fortress; whereupon an escort of halberdiers marched up behind St. Pol, who with rapid movements now pulled down his collar and took off his hat. The President and the Provost Marshal approached him bareheaded, and Le Boulanger said:

"My lord, allow me to welcome you in our midst. Be of good cheer and keep a stout heart. You may count on the justice of the King."

The two men put on their hats again, as did also St. Pol, who now turned with a frown to Provost Tristan. The latter thrust forward a parchment scroll bearing the King's seal, rolled it up, touched St. Pol lightly on the shoulder with it, and said in his gentle voice:

"In the name of the King, I make you, Louis of Luxemburg, the prisoner of Captain Philip Luillier, Governor of the Bastille, and beg you to inform me whether you are willing to answer to the charge of high treason and lèse majesté before me, the Provost Marshal of France, and the regular Court of Parliament, or whether you wish the decision to lie with the

House of Peers, which, in accordance with the prerogatives of your birth, though not of your office, you are entitled to demand."

As the Constable was aware that most of the nobility were hostile to him, and, at this particular juncture, were more anxious than were the professional judges to please the King; as, moreover, he laboured under the extraordinary delusion that the prosecution would not be able to collect the necessary legal evidence against him, he agreed to the competency of the Parliament. He was not put under constraint nor placed in the dungeons of the Bastille, but was consigned to a comparatively comfortable apartment in a tower, which was placed under a military guard. The trial began forthwith, but with small result, as St. Pol contested every point in the argument of the prosecution, and showed even more skill than Nemours had done in turning the publicity of the proceedings to account. With great ingenuity he reverted again and again to the King's weak spot — the affair of Liège, and Louis' intrigue with the late Johann von Wildt, which had very wisely been omitted from the case for the prosecution, and could on no account be made public.

A few days of complete inaction followed, which, however, filled the prisoner with greater alarm than all the stir and bustle of the judicial proceedings. Nothing was more intolerable to his energetic and courageous temperament than uncertainty. He wished to fight, but he wished to see his opponent. The King's crafty methods excited his hatred as much as they did his fears. He grew more and more anxious; he suspected his food was being poisoned, and imagined he would be shot through the observation grille in his prison door. At last, one evening, he heard footsteps less familiar than those of his guard. The lock rattled, the heavy iron door creaked on its hinges, and a slim man, clad in the cloak of a Florentine magician, stepped in and bowed. St. Pol examined him closely for a moment, and flushed with anger.

"Are things so bad with me, or with the King," he enquired sharply, "that he can send me none other than his private spy? I have acknowledged the Parliament as my tribunal — not a *souteneur*, gifted though he be in changing his calling with the colour of his hair. I have nothing to do with you!"

So saying, he quickly turned his back on Necker. Oliver's lips grew thinner than ever and his nostrils quivered.

"The colour of my hair to-day is so genuine," he observed coldly, with a threatening blink of his eyes, "that you may rest assured it is an ominous sign, my lord."

St. Pol swung round swiftly and shook his fist.

"Are you here to shave me or to cut my throat, Sir Barber?" he enquired maliciously. "I remember you once offered to shave me, and what I suspected on that occasion. It strikes me I did not make such a bad guess in Péronne after all, and am hitting the bull's-eye now. It would certainly facilitate matters for the Court and relieve the King of his embarrassment. But don't you think the deed is beyond your strength?"

And seizing a chair, he swung it menacingly round his head. Necker laughed aloud.

"My lord!" he cried, "so terribly wide of the mark are you that I must needs marvel; for ever since Péronne I had believed you to be a better marksman! Do you really suppose I am fitted to engage in a hand-to-hand struggle with you? Or do you really imagine that His Majesty or the Court are in a dilemma? Be so good as to put that chair down quietly and seat yourself upon it. I am here to inform you, in the King's name, though not on behalf of the Court, that the tactics you are pursuing at your trial are entirely misguided. They can serve no purpose and can harm only yourself."

The Constable, placing the chair before him, looked gravely at Necker.

"How can I place the smallest credence in such a one — precisely such a one — as you?" he said at last, with a furtive smile. "How can I believe that you would wish to preserve me from harm?"

"Then listen to me," Oliver replied, "and decide for yourself. If you compel the Court to deal with the King's policy regarding Liège, you are indirectly guilty of a fresh act of high treason. Moreover, you compel the King to bring a further charge against you by the inclusion of your crime at Péronne — yes, your crime at Péronne, my lord," he repeated emphatically, as the Constable raised a hand in protest; "for he can prove the very day and hour that you sent that order to

von Wildt, having not only myself as witness, but also and most important of all, the protocol of Balue's confession now lying in the secret archives, which is evidence of the whole conspiracy. However, for serious reasons connected with his foreign policy, the King wishes to avoid prosecuting on these grounds. But you may rest assured, my lord, that he will go through with it, if you force his hand. This much he swears to you on his Crown. In which case he promises you to adopt a form of procedure which at present he neither intends nor for your sake desires to adopt."

St. Pol stared at the floor and clenched his teeth.

"I shall lose my head in any case," he said slowly and gloomily. "So what care I for the form of procedure?"

Necker gazed at him so intently that he raised his head, and his pupils grew wide with horror before the other spoke. Once more Oliver began in a voice full of gentleness:

"There are two possible courses open to His Majesty, which in that event he would be content to adopt — either torture in all its degrees, or that form of death which, while it may leave the head on the body, does not leave the body whole. . . ."

Necker, observing the prisoner's deathly pallor, was silent, and St. Pol, leaning heavily on the chair, suddenly felt his knees give way. Oliver advanced a step as if to help him. But in a moment St. Pol had recovered himself and pushed the chair forward like a shield between himself and the Master. Then he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Why should he wish to torture me?" he enquired hoarsely, "when I have nothing else to confess — unless it be my disobedience in not responding to his invitation to the Council of War, and my flight to Mons?"

"Have you really nothing else to confess, my lord?"

"Nothing!"

"My lord, have you not to confess that you are guilty of high treason four times over: did you not give a written promise to Burgundy to return the townships, and challenge him to make war upon his supreme suzerain lord — urging an enemy of the realm to invade the realm — promising to ally yourself with Burgundy and England?"

"No — prove it!"

Oliver smiled unpleasantly.

"Well," he said, "though I am no lawyer, I can prove it notwithstanding."

Slowly he opened the ample folds of his mantle, and withdrew four documents written in the Constable's own hand — the letters to the Duke and the King of England, and the two letters dealing with the alliance. Like a flash St. Pol sprang upon him, hurling the chair aside, and snatched the scrolls from him. Oliver laughed.

"I wish you joy of them, my lord! Keep them or destroy them; certified copies are in possession of the Court!"

St. Pol yelled with rage and despair, and flung the documents at Necker's feet. Then, sinking on to the bed, his head in his hands, he began to shake all over, as though he were cold or else were weeping. Oliver, now very grave, went up to him.

"My lord," he whispered with some emotion, "confess to the Court — and forgive me. To-day I have done you no harm."

He bowed, hastily kissed the hard knuckles of the Constable's fist, and departed. St. Pol, open-mouthed, looked up, saw the door swing to, heard the grating of the lock, and once more the ceaseless tread of the guard. For some time he contemplated the hand Oliver had kissed. That same night he asked for writing materials.

On the following day the astonished Parliament read the Constable's written confession and an accurate report of his political intrigues from the time that he had occupied the Somme townships. The trial was now brought to a close without let or hindrance. St. Pol repeated his admission at the public hearing, and acknowledged the authorship of the four documents proving him guilty of high treason. In less than a week all the records of the trial, together with the verdict, which was not to be communicated to the prisoner before the morning of the day on which he was to be executed, were, in obedience to the royal command, sent to the King at Amboise.

Necker, alone with Louis in the tower, read the verdict in calm and measured tones:

"... And now all which had to be examined and weighed having been solemnly and strictly ascertained and weighed, the Court hath found and herewith declareth Messire Louis of Luxemburg guilty of the crimes of lèse majesté and high treason,

and deprived of his office of Constable of France, together with all his other offices, honours, titles and dignities. In expiation of his crimes, the Court hath condemned and doth hereby condemn him to suffer death by beheading on the Place de Grève in Paris, in full view of the people; and hath declared and hereby declareth that all and every portion of his property, whether personal or real, shall be confiscate to the Crown, who will dispose of it. In so doing, the claims of the Duke of Burgundy shall be duly recognised, and ratified by documents specially prepared. And in view of the monstrous nature of his crime, Messire Louis of Luxemburg will, after his head hath fallen, be drawn and quartered, and his four limbs exposed to the public view, and his trunk shall be hanged on the gallows. . . .”

Oliver stopped and looked at the King, whose head was bowed. Whereupon without hesitating he went over to the table, took a quill, and struck out the last sentence.

“The King did not desire that,” he said gravely; “that his conscience could never tolerate.”

Louis nodded a silent consent. And Necker, turning towards him again, said gently:

“I know that you dictated this sentence in precisely these words to Provost Tristan before the trial opened, Sire. The brutal clause which I have just struck through outweighs all the real or apparent acts of humanity which lie to your credit this year. Now you are once again in my debt, Sire.”

The King bit his lip and was silent. Oliver continued to read:

“. . . After his execution, which will be carried out, as the Court hath decreed, in full view of the people, his body shall be buried in consecrated ground if he so desires.”

Louis signed the sentence and added a line to the effect that no plea for mercy would be entertained, and then, laying down the quill, he buried his head in his hands.

“These heads make me weary, Oliver,” he muttered, “it is well that you are alert and at my side.”

Three days later — it was the 19th of December and a Wednesday — Captain Luillier, Governor of the Bastille, entered the prisoner’s room at an early hour, and found that he did not stir. He raised the wax torch. St. Pol was lying on the bed; his eyes were closed, and his features set. His chin alone

quivered, making his teeth chatter. The Governor enquired gently:

"Are you asleep, my lord?"

The Constable slowly shook his head on the pillow and hardly moving his lips, replied:

"I am not asleep, Captain. It is long indeed since I slept. I am bowed down beneath the weight of heavy thoughts, Captain. Thoughts of death weight heavy on the mind, and thoughts of life heavier still."

The Captain bowed his head. Whereupon St. Pol asked the strange question:

"With which hand shall I make the sign of the cross to-day, Captain?"

"With the usual hand," Luillier replied, deeply moved, "which in the case of all good Christians is the right — if the Devil is not to tamper with your prayers."

"The Devil?" St. Pol exclaimed gloomily, and raising his right hand, he examined its knuckles closely. They were silent for a while; then the Constable muttered:

"Say what you have to say, Captain."

The kind-hearted fellow fumbled for words.

"You must get up, my lord, and come with me to the Parliament house. The gentlemen there have something to tell you."

St. Pol opened his eyes wide, but quickly shut them again.

"Do the gentlemen intend to give me fresh quarters, Captain?"

"No," Luillier replied with some hesitation.

"But the people of Paris hate me, and may do me some injury," muttered St. Pol, showing his teeth in an agonised smile.

"I will guarantee the safety of your journey, my lord."

The Constable got up and dressed. Before leaving the room he touched the cross with his left hand and said:

"The right is the Devil's side, and on the left is the heart which gives us life, Captain." He tried to smile. "To thee, O God, do I commend my life."

In the courtyard they found a horseman clad in black with two saddle horses.

"Who is that gentleman?" the Constable enquired.

"The Chevalier d'Estouteville, Provost of Paris."

St. Pol glanced at him and, turning up his collar, mounted. The two gentlemen closed up on either side of him, and thus silent and unobserved, they rode through the Rue St. Antoine, which was still empty, in the direction of the Parliament house. Entering the Rue de la Barillerie, they rode through the great gate of the building, into the Cour du Mai, and halted before the steps that led to the Galerie des Merciers. Luillier sprang from his horse and assisted the Constable out of the saddle. At the foot of the steps stood the Parliamentary actuary, who addressed a few personal questions to the prisoner. St. Pol replied with a brief "Yes." In the gallery he was received with all due courtesy by the Promotor of the Court, and the Provost Marshal, and thanked them with calm dignity. The two then walked a few paces ahead, while the prisoner followed with the two men who had escorted him from the Bastille. They then entered the rooms of the Criminal Court, which was called the Tournelle Criminelle. The Promotor threw open the door, and begged the Constable to walk in. The windows of the room were draped with black hangings, which kept out the light of day. Behind a black-covered table, on which black candles were burning in two mighty candelabra, there sat the two presidents of the Court. They rose as the five men entered, and the doors were closed and bolted.

Provost Tristan stepped forward and said in a gentle voice:

"My lord St. Pol, hitherto and until this moment you were accounted the bravest and most excellent of the knights of France. You will now be called upon to give such proof of your courage as you have never done before."

He paused. St. Pol clenched his teeth and looked straight into his eyes.

"My lord," l'Hermite continued, "I must now call upon you to divest yourself of the insignia of your rank; I trust you will not force me to do so for you. My lord, in the name of the King, remove from your neck the official chain of the Constable, which His Majesty bestowed upon you!"

St. Pol obeyed, but his trembling hands could not loosen the pin which fastened the chain to his collar. He turned his head round helplessly.

"Help me, Captain," he said in a hoarse voice. Luillier sprang forward and unfastened the pin. Then, turning quickly

about, St. Pol kissed him on the brow, slipped the chain off, and gave it to him.

"Give it up for me, Captain," he said, and the officer, bowing silently, handed it to Provost Tristan, who, after laying it on the table, stepped back a few paces and said:

"Louis of Luxemburg, take heed of the sentence of the Court!"

President Le Boulanger took up the scroll, read the verdict in loud and measured tones, and then showed the prisoner the King's rejection of the plea for mercy, and also his signature and seal. As the judge withdrew the document, St. Pol supported himself on the table and, bowing his head, groaned:

"Oh, my God, my God, it is hard!"

His lips were white, his cheeks quivered violently, and his shoulders jerked convulsively up and down. He looked as if he were about to burst into laughter. Suddenly Captain Luillier was heard to sob. All eyes were turned upon him; even St. Pol moved to look at him. With a calm and kindly smile, he took a diamond ring from his finger and beckoned him to approach.

"Will you allow me, my lords, to leave a memento to compassion?" he asked.

Le Boulanger looked at Provost Tristan, who said gently: "The ring belongs to the King."

St. Pol laughed a short, loud laugh, and throwing the ring down on the stone floor, he stamped it to powder with his heel.

"The King knows no compassion, Captain," he observed over his shoulder. "It would have been hard luck for the ring."

The gentlemen bit their lips. After a while, St. Pol asked in a whisper:

"My lords, when . . . ?"

Provost Tristan replied:

"To-day."

The Provost of the City threw open the door leading to the next room and invited St. Pol, who now seemed calm and collected, to go in to his confessors. The room was filled with such a blaze of sunlight that the prisoner was obliged to shield his dazzled eyes. The four doctors of theology — a Franciscan, an Augustinian, the Penitentiary of the Diocese, and the priest of St. André des Arts, Dean of the Theological Faculty of the

Sorbonne — welcomed him with kind and gentle words to their midst. St. Pol desired to partake of the Blessed Sacrament, but the Host could not be given him. They celebrated Mass before him, and he was satisfied. They gave him consecrated bread and water, and he ate of the bread, but would not drink of the water. He remained with them until three in the afternoon, made his confession and received absolution. Whereupon he was conveyed to the town hall, and, in one of the rooms on the ground floor, from which could be seen the waiting crowds on the Place de Grève, he wrote with a firm hand a codicil to his will in favour of Captain Luillier and his confessors. The President promised to obtain the King's approval of it. At three o'clock, surrounded by the priests, he stepped on to the Place de Grève, on which several scaffolds had been erected at short intervals. The Parliamentary attorney ascended the steps of the largest scaffold, and in a loud voice read to the people of Paris the prisoner's confession and the sentence of the Court. The most profound silence reigned. The sea of heads that filled the Place de Grève reached as far as the Church of the Holy Spirit. St. Pol was led to a small scaffold, close to the large one, and, dropping on his knees, with his face turned towards Notre Dame, he uttered a short prayer and kissed the cross which the Augustinian held out to him. Then, rising to his feet, he looked at the executioner's block.

At this moment a thick-set man of medium height stepped on to the platform. He had enormous shoulders and was clad in a red, sleeveless doublet. It was Henri Cousin, the executioner. St. Pol looked at him and smiled.

"My friend, are you the man who is to despatch me to another world?"

Henri Cousin, somewhat embarrassed, thrust out his massive chin.

"Yes, my lord," he replied, "such is the order I have received from the Supreme Court."

With a swift movement St. Pol tore his collar open, and bared his neck and breast. Then he stretched out his hands to the executioner, who bound them with a silken cord. Whereupon the Constable ascended the steps of the scaffold, stretched his mighty body, and threw his head back. Then, turning to his judges, who were standing stiff and silent some distance away, he cried in a penetrating voice:

"My lords, pray for my miserable soul! And pray for the soul of the King, which is even more miserable!"

Then, turning to the sea of heads, which was growing ever more and more restless, and swayed hither and thither in dumb attention, he shouted:

"Citizens, pray for my miserable soul! And pray for your own souls, which are even more miserable!"

Thereupon he nudged Henri Cousin's naked arm with his elbow and said peremptorily:

"Quickly, my friend! Quickly, quickly!"

He knelt down on a small piece of linen which bore the arms of the city. Cousin covered his eyes with a cloth, and from the hands of an assistant took the heavy executioner's sword. The pale winter sun gleamed on the steel as it rose, and the muscles of the executioner's heavy neck and shoulders seemed to swell as though they would burst. So powerful was the blow that the body fell to the ground sooner than the head. The executioner, his legs apart, staggered for a moment, shaken by his own feat, and supported himself quickly on his upright sword. Then, raising his head, he wiped the sweat and blood from his face with the back of his hand, picked up the fallen head by the hair, plunged it into a pail of water, and stuck it on one of the posts of the scaffold. The lips were parted so that the teeth gleamed in the dead man's head. The people yelled and, breaking through the wall of soldiers, tore down the hangings on the scaffold and scrambled for the pieces.

That same evening eight Franciscan friars and forty torch bearers bore away the head and the body.

Chapter 5

THE EARTHLY BOUNDS

IT was springtime and the King and Necker were expecting Queen Charlotte to be brought to bed. They did little during these weeks of waiting, but left the kingdom to recover from the shocks and perils of the winter, and allowed politics, as it were, to rest at anchor, pending the signal which the Queen's ordeal would give for their new venture. The King was more sceptical than Necker, for the latter reckoned with strange certainty upon the happy birth of a son. Louis frequently observed that, not only in both his marriages, but also in his own and his wife's families, there had been more daughters than sons. But whenever he did so, Oliver shook his head and, smiling reassuringly, declared that this proved nothing, and by no means excluded the possibility of a son being born to him.

"Have you subjected Charlotte of Savoy to your magic arts, then, Oliver?" Louis enquired, referring ironically to his Chamberlain's calm certainty.

"I have called her attention to the magic powers of her own will," Necker replied gravely, "and also to the virtue of the anemone, which, according to a secret recipe dating from Carlovingian days, is believed to convert the fruit of the womb into a male. But I certainly have more faith in will than in the flower, though the flower strengthens the energy of the woman, which must in any case be directed by no other feelings than those of duty and purpose. Sire, I believe in the birth of the Dauphin, because he is necessary."

"Necessary?" the King enquired softly, as if in a pleasant reverie. "But only you and I are necessary . . ."

Necker stood gazing at him.

"Are we not mortal, Sire?"

The King hastily seized his hands and, glancing about him, as if he were afraid of being overheard, whispered:

"I cherish a deep desire to question that. I feel the will to question it. You and I, brother, have overcome humanity in

ourselves; why should we not be able to double the length of our lives? I believe in the superiority of our united intellects over our individual bodies. I believe in surmounting the earthly bounds of our lives, by means of my power and your magic."

Necker gave the ghost of a smile.

"Then you fear death, Sire?" he asked in dispassionate tones. And as Louis made no reply, he added slowly:

"Do you regard what you please to call my magic as the work of the Devil?"

The King raised a hand in protest.

"Why do you put that question to the only man who happens to know you are not of the Devil, Oliver? Am I not the beneficiary of your —"

He stopped as if groping for a word. Oliver's lips parted in a beautiful smile. And Louis concluded gently:

"— your humanity. . . ."

Necker bowed his head.

"Maybe that is the proper word, Sire; maybe it is not. But I confess the word pleases me. After all, we, too, can surely not rise superior to human conceptions. And, believe me, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to surmount the earthly bounds of our lives, if we dread the . . ."

"And I do dread the alternative," Louis stammered. "I hate it, and I shall fight against it as I have never fought before!"

"Is life, then, so desirable?" Oliver cried with strange vehemence. The King looked up in astonishment.

"I know of nothing better, friend," he said sadly, "and all I know of death is death for others — and it has never been pleasant to contemplate, or worthy of love. Besides, as a living creature, I am the King, and not by right of birth alone! For, in truth, I am the only man in the realm who is fit to rule. Where would this great country be now if I were not here — I and you with me? It is my duty to love our lives, friend, and you will have to help me when the great enemy is at the door."

Oliver lowered his eyes. The conversation seemed to have agitated him strangely, as though he were listening to thoughts with which he had long been fervently preoccupied. He raised his head quickly, and there was a faint flush on his brow and cheeks. He spoke with some hesitation as if he were embarrassed.

"Have not both of us wandered very far away from — God, Sire? Are we never going to apply our minds to returning to Him in all humility? We might, Sire, lose all touch with human things. Matters have gone so far that you have just spoken of me — *me*, Sire! — as the incarnation of humanity, and I was pleased to hear you say it. But what shall we do when we are completely isolated? Will you then have the courage to feel the lack of God, or will you substitute yourself in His stead?"

The King gazed at him long and steadily. Then he said slowly:

"I think I am a Christian notwithstanding. I do not believe that I shall ever be able to lose God. I believe that God dwells within me, even if we do become isolated, or even if we struggle in an un-Christian manner against death."

Oliver nodded, as if he were pleased with the reply.

"But would not this struggle be easier," he cried suddenly, "easier for the Christian, if he learnt to esteem the lives of others more highly, and to treat them as if they were precious?"

Louis shook his head thoughtfully.

"God does not wish this struggle to be easy," he said hesitatingly, "for He did not wish me to be a mild ruler." Then, after a moment's pause, he added emphatically: "You can help me, brother, and you must not try to plead Him as an excuse for evading your duty."

Oliver strode up and down the room, and his eyes glowed with goodness.

"I shall no longer try to make things easy for myself," he murmured. "I will follow you, Sire, into your great solitude and in your fight against the great enemy. But there is still much sorrow to be overcome before the boundary is reached. Do not despise it, Sire, just because it is of the earth."

Louis pressed his hands together and breathed more quickly.

"Will Anne recover?" he asked suddenly, as if he dreaded the answer. Necker stopped pacing to and fro.

"So you are still this side of the boundary, Sire?"

"Yes," Louis rejoined with a pained smile.

"Perhaps she will recover," said Oliver compassionately.

The first news of the Queen's confinement, which was brought to the anxious Chamberlain by an express messenger,

came as a deathblow to all his hopes. Biting his lips, he dismissed the man with a wave of the hand. Looking out of the bay window of one of the front rooms of the castle, he gazed with unseeing eyes on the broad landscape just donning its mantle of fresh young green, with the pale young sun upon it; and shaking his head absently, he seemed crushed by the stubborn cruelty of Fate. How was it possible for something not to be, which had to be, something which had been prepared with such great efforts of will, renunciation and pain, and the happy realisation of which he had imperilled by no doubts, no uncertainty? Above all, was he depressed by the futility of the sacrifices which had been made by four human beings, and the useless overcoming of his own will. With furrowed brow he brooded over his defeat. Again he shook his head, as if yielding to a deep impulse not to acknowledge it. Then, slowly, he went in search of the King, who was working out a new scheme of taxation with Jean de Beaune. He hardly waited for them to look up, nor did he attempt any preamble or introduction to his message. He simply said coldly:

"Sire, the Queen has been brought to bed of a child still-born — it was a boy."

Louis stood up without uttering a word. His thick lips were drawn down, and between his brows there were two deep furrows. He did not look at Necker or at Beaune, who, with an expression of embarrassment, was fumbling with enormous account books, but left the Treasurer's work-room and repaired to the tower. He strode to the sun-bathed window. His hands were clasped behind him, his head was sunk into his shoulders, and he was as blind to the vernal radiance outside as Oliver had been. He heard Necker enter the room, but did not turn round.

"So you were wrong, my friend," he said savagely. "All that trouble for nothing!"

"Sire," Necker replied a moment later, "Fate is stronger than error, and is never in vain."

The King unclasped his hands from behind his back and clenched his fists. His shoulders shook as though he were trying not to turn round and give vent to his rage.

"Oliver," he said through clenched teeth, "if you do not call the sacrifice of Anne useless, then you must regard it as useful; in which case your error was a piece of fiendish ingenuity!"

"Sire!" Necker cried so loudly that the King bowed his head in terror, "do not forget the sacrifice made by the Queen, and the tortures of her lacerated body!"

Louis slowly raised his hands to the bronze bolt of the window, and rested his brow upon them.

"Wretch that I am!" he groaned. There was silence for a while. Then he heard Necker approaching, felt his hand on his arm, and heard him whisper:

"Thus will Anne make you rich. . . ."

He turned round quickly and seized Oliver by the wrist. He wanted to cry out for joy, and ask the blessed question. But Necker's eyes were so hard and his lips so thin, for all the world as if contempt lurked in the lines about them, that he was unable to speak, and yet could not close his mouth. He bowed his head, released his hold of Oliver with a look of shame, and sitting silently down at his writing table, rubbed his brow and eyes in bewilderment.

"It is now the King's hour," said Oliver in matter-of-fact tones. "Momentous decisions must be made. The Queen's misfortune is also a political misfortune. The problem of the Duke of Guienne is as difficult now as it was nine months ago. But it will have to be solved, for, ever since the fall of Nancy, the Duke of Brittany and Sieur d'Urfé have become increasingly active. But for the moment, I confess, I see no solution."

Under the influence of Oliver's cold words, Louis' mind grew clearer and calmer, like that of a wakened sleeper suddenly brought into a fresh breeze. Involuntarily he raised his head.

"I think the solution is the same as that which I wanted nine months ago," he said sharply. "And it would still have remained the same, even if your bold plan had succeeded. That is what we agreed upon. Now the dynastic buttress, both for Duke Charles and for our conscience, has collapsed, and we are confronted by the same need of hardness as we were nine months ago — as we were even before that, on the night of our solemn deliberations in Péronne. The only thing that has changed is the order of sequence. Duke Charles no longer opens the dance, but closes it. For the year has been well employed."

Oliver looked at him with faint astonishment, and smiled discreetly.

"You are no soft-hearted ruler," he replied, "and you soon recover your professional rigour. But if the solution remains the same, my objections to it also remain the same. You are depriving your kingdom of the successor to the throne, Sire."

Louis drummed on the table with his fingers.

"I recollect very distinctly, my friend," he said, no longer able to contain his wrath, "that at the time your own objections and those raised by our other friends were made subject to what Fate might decree. And now Fate has decided that I am to be given no male heir. You would not really dare, Oliver, to urge me a second time . . ."

He suddenly stopped as Necker raised a protesting hand.

"No, no, no, Sire!" he cried in horror. "You shall not summon the royal lady here a second time!"

"Certainly not," said the King emphatically. "Why, then, do you bar my way again, and yet, at the same time, urge upon me the necessity of doing something?"

Necker shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not yet clear about it in my own mind," he confessed. "I absolutely fail to see what is to be done. I find it very difficult."

After a moment's hesitation the King enquired:

"Am I to gather from all this, Oliver, that conscience will once again refuse to obey me? And would it have obeyed if the Dauphin had lived?"

"Will you give me time to answer that question, Sire?" Necker pleaded in distressed tones. Louis shook his head in mute astonishment.

There was a knock at the door. The King glanced up involuntarily, with a curse for the intruder on his lips. But Oliver, his face already aglow with vague expectancy, made a gesture appealing for silence, and cried:

"Who is there?"

"An express messenger from the Lord High Chamberlain of the Queen, with urgent news."

Oliver, who had already opened the door, snatched from a hairy hand that was shaking with fatigue a roll of parchment. With two bounds he reached the King's side, and Louis, who had remained calmly seated, slowly and solemnly broke the seals.

"Why are you so excited?" he enquired of Necker, as he cast a furtive glance up at him. "What do you expect except confirmation of the news?"

He undid the scroll and read. Not a muscle of his face stirred, but Oliver noticed that his eyes brightened and he smiled for joy. Louis turned to face him and gazed at him for some moments.

"Then you were not wrong, after all, brother," he said. "The woman was wrong who in the first moment of consternation sent us that false report. The birth was difficult and the child appeared to be dead. But, in accordance with the rules of medical art, it was swayed about in the air until at last it condescended to make the best of its royal existence. The Dauphin is alive and will certainly live. Queen Charlotte is out of danger. The King may congratulate himself."

He rose and went across to the window again.

"How beautifully green the landscape is already," he observed. Oliver was still leaning against the writing table; he had just taken a quick glance at the message, and was frowning thoughtfully. It was imperative that his satisfaction over the triumph of his will should not last too long, or disturb his new deliberations. And the problem which now occupied his mind seemed hard indeed. He came and stood behind the King, and his expression was gloomy. Louis' shoulders moved as if he felt Necker's eyes upon him.

"The Kingdom has its Dauphin," he said in a voice that seemed to have changed. "You said it was necessary, Oliver. He will only be able to prove in twenty years' time whether he is worthy of his birth, and only in thirty years whether he can be necessary. Brother, I still refuse to believe that we are not as necessary as ever. I still refuse to diminish by one iota my will to live."

Necker shook his head behind the King's back.

"Are this tower and its owner still really on the earth which we see bursting into leaf before us?" he enquired gently. "Sire, the Dauphin has only been in existence for the space of a few short hours — and you already hate him. The joy of a human father scarce lighted your eyes for more minutes than you have fingers on your hand. And you called yourself a Christian, Sire!"

"Oh, Oliver," Louis wailed, "it is very difficult for the King to be a Christian. You see, I should be quite ready to love him were he not destined to replace me. But it is the curse of kings that they must hate and fear their son and heir. I should love him if his life did not condemn me to death — Oliver, if I were not doomed to die. I will be candid and confess everything, because you will know everything — my brief joy was not that of a father, it was blasphemy —"

He broke off suddenly, and throwing back his head, like a man who is trying to catch a beautiful note, continued in a whisper:

"I wish you would finish what I was about to say, brother."

Oliver smiled; he was moved by the intimate note in the King's voice, and obeyed.

"— Joy over the triumph of what you are pleased to call my magic," he said, finishing the King's sentence. Louis seemed agitated.

"But even that is not all, Oliver. That is not the whole of my wicked hope!"

Necker grew pale.

"I dare not say it," he replied gently. "It were not good to say it, Sire!"

But Louis, his face and his eyes aflame, turned round and stretched out his arms.

"But I do dare to say it!" he cried. "The magic which can bring about life can also ward off death! You can step across the boundary, brother, and you will take me with you!"

Oliver retreated a step or two, his eyes sad, his head bowed.

"We are still this side of the boundary," he whispered, and seemed distressed. "Sire, were you not a wretched man a moment ago?"

The King nodded slowly, as if carried back to his sorrow, and did not look at Necker.

"And I am still," he groaned, "for now you will probably not allow me to grow rich. I have no wish to hasten towards the boundary. Does what you said a moment ago — about Anne — still hold good?"

"It still holds good," said Necker softly, and looking into the King's eyes, he added: "And I thank you, Sire, for not repeating that other question, which still continues to weigh

equally heavily upon me, concerning that other name and its destiny. For I prefer to struggle against the great enemy, rather than to serve him — and your conscience should do the same. So will you allow yourself more time for your new question, Sire, and allow me more time to answer it?"

Louis went quickly up to him and kissed him on the brow.

"Yes, brother," he said, deeply moved, "I do not wish to hear for the present whether conscience will obey. I will not think of death now, nor even of death for others."

With faltering steps Oliver went to Anne, stopping constantly on the way, his eyes turned inwards on his soul. Am I not already nearer to the boundary than he is, he asked himself, and do I not already know the last bends in the road? And yet why do I not run and drag him along with me? Why do I creep along ever more slowly — as I am now doing — and force him to keep behind me at the same pace, and allow the last of all sorrows to fall upon us with its full weight? Do I love the man in him more than I love the King? For surely it is a sign of love that I should protect the man in him against the King, and teach the one to take heed of pleasure and pain, and the other to heed the voice of conscience? Or is all this no more than the cruelty of a soul cleft in twain, which punishes him and me, and scourges the man with the King, and the King with the man? The Boundary! The Boundary! It defines all human happiness, sorrow, repentance and falsehood! He still wishes for them all — all four — or is it I who wish for them? He will have them yet. And then? The King will cross the boundary. The King is himself and myself — might and magic in one. Well put, Sire! Two demoniacal words without the smallest accompaniment of earthly humility! Oliver laughed. Do you imagine, Sire, that it is going to be so easy to forget the man? Sire, I will betray my secret to you, the heritage I received from my father: I love mankind, because they have wounded me and I them. Sire, that is the dowry with which I endowed you! I am a humane Devil, and we shall find it difficult to live, and to find pleasure in life, without human concerns. Sire, great solitude, and the great enemy, are both inhuman. You, Sire, will be stronger in struggle, and I stronger in — defeat. . . .

Anne was slowly fading away. She was nearly always

asleep, and when she was awake she was not only free from all pain and care, but her thoughts were so clear that they seemed to have wings. She had discovered a strange form of comfort — a sort of playful, gentle and almost abstract joy in her own beauty. The slow action of the poison inside her did not destroy her outward form, but gradually removed the feverish yellowness from her skin, and in its stead left her body the transparent colour of unpolished ivory. Her face was full of mystic calm, serenity and grace. Her expression, which was no longer morbid, already partook of the unearthly, and had removed all trace of sorrow from about her mouth, all hard lines from the oval of her face, and left her brow ineffably soft and pure above her sunless eyes. Mirrors stood beside her bed. In a recess, in front of her arm-chair, there stood a small table with another mirror. And the distance she traversed from her bed to the recess constituted her daily exercise. As soon as she awoke, she would gaze at herself in the mirror, silently, intently and happily. Her face did not move; she looked at herself as she would have looked at a picture, and lost herself in the dreamy depths of her own eyes. Then, summoning Daniel Bart, or one of her women, she would ask to be carried to the recess. After vouchsafing the landscape one brief and distant glance, she would seek her own image once again, and it filled her with unutterable joy and happiness. Sometimes she would even smile faintly at her own reflection, or pretend to be sad, and then, quickly growing tired, would fall asleep and dream of herself. She did not often speak, or pay much heed to what was going on about her. Those in attendance upon her often did not know whether she heard what they said to her. She heard them well enough, but she did not think it worth her while to answer. Daniel Bart's awkward solicitude alone moved her to speak or to reply. And when the Master came to see her, she often astonished him with her intensity and the liveliness and keenness of her insight.

When Oliver entered, she was asleep in the arm-chair that stood in the recess. Quietly sitting down on a stool at her side, he gazed upon her. Her head was almost lying on her left shoulder, which she had lifted slightly, and her breath came short, soft and quick through her half-opened mouth. The sweep of her long lashes cast faint, wistful shadows on her cheeks. Her face was perfectly peaceful, and her hands lay contentedly folded in

her lap. Suddenly a smile hovered about her lips, and, before her eyes had even opened, she whispered:

"Oliver . . ."

Necker leant forward and kissed her hand. She gave a little sigh like a child that is feeling happy and said:

"Give me the mirror."

Oliver handed it to her; she raised it to her face and, passing the fingers of her left hand across her brow, examined her image.

"Why does the King not wish to see me now?" she enquired unexpectedly. "I don't need to paint my face any longer now, and would not disappoint him again."

He gazed into her eyes, and was astonished. Her pupils changed under his look, but her eyes did not meet his.

"What made you think of that?" he enquired excitedly. She laid a hand over the face in the mirror, as if she did not wish her reply to be disturbed by the sight of her own image. Then, closing her eyes and opening them again, she turned to look at him.

"I feel as if you had brought the thought into the room with you, Oliver."

Even her voice had changed. It was pitched higher and was less full, and seemed to ring like silver after her softly spoken words. It seemed to have stolen the witchery which had once belonged to her smile. Or could it be — and, as they looked at her, Oliver's eyes softened — that the smile was now in her voice? As she spoke, her face had not moved, yet the words had been uttered with a smile, with perfectly restrained and infinitely cheerful vibrations. And just as the smile of her lips had once been wondrously wedded with the look in her eyes, and with the softly sparkling gold about her pupils, so now the mellow fire in her eyes seemed to be reflected in the tone of her voice, and to impart its radiance to the sounds which the listener heard. In her miraculous decline, like that of a flower, it was as if her senses were freeing themselves from their narrow specialisation, from each other, and from the senses of those with whom she came in contact; as if she were shuffling them about, playing with them, and allowing them to flit about her, like bright, iridescent elves, from place to place. Oliver smiled, too.

"If you can see that, Anne," he said kindly, "then you also know a good deal more."

He put his face nearer to her. She looked into his eyes, and then at his brow, and again into his eyes. She leant her head a little to one side, her teeth faintly gleaming and her eyes shining with the sweet cunning of a child who confesses that it is not asleep, but feels certain that it will not be scolded.

"I know a great deal! Oh, I know a great deal!" she murmured in mysterious tones, still sparkling with smiles. "I know, Oliver, that neither he nor I, but only you, may now dwell on the thought of death. And it ought to come hardest to me, and yet, think, Oliver, to me it will be the easiest thing on earth."

Oliver bowed his head, and the heavy beating of his heart made him all at once feel weak and ill. Her voice rose and faltered uneasily.

"Oliver! Oliver! Look at me! Otherwise I swear I must be blind! Otherwise I swear I shall never be certain of anything again. And I must be certain; will you?"

Slowly he raised his head, and with a great effort lifted his eyes to her. . . . Her voice grew hollow with amazement.

"Oliver, are you crying?" she gasped. "Oliver, can you cry? Oh, don't cry! I mean, if you do, I am blind!"

Necker gave one short, loud sob, and threw his head back. Then it was all over, and his eyes were bright and clear again.

"You could not have been crying," said Anne thoughtfully, gazing into the mirror. "For you, of course, know when the end must come." She gave him a friendly nod, and then in a voice full of secret joy she added: "You know it and I see it — where, I may not say. But I ought not to think about it." Then, looking at him, she said: "Let us give him the pleasure, Oliver. For, if the mirror gives me so much pleasure, I surely might give him some of it — what, Oliver?"

"Of course," replied Necker, with a nod. "For, after all, the mirror shows you your life, Anne."

He spoke in a subdued voice, as if he feared the words might hurt her. And she did, indeed, seem to be affected by them.

"My life?" she exclaimed, strangely surprised. "Why do you not say my image? Oliver, I can give him pleasure neither

with my life nor with myself. . . ." She raised a hand as if she were afraid. " Oliver, I have no more feelings, and the earthly body frightens me. . . . Oliver, it is the fear of death! Oliver, I will vouchsafe him the joy my mirror gives me! But he must not curtail it for me — he must not want me again. . . . Or were you really crying, Oliver? "

Necker passed a hand across his brow, as if bracing himself for a decision, and when he raised his head, his expression was resolute.

" No," he said gravely and definitely, " he must not want you again."

She took his face between her hands, drew it to her, and gazed into his eyes.

" Now it is all right," she murmured happily, " and, after all, his love is Oliver! Whatever you intend me to do now is good. Now things may last yet a little while longer. And, Oliver, he knows that you do good."

She released him, and her eyes, as they left him, turned slowly towards space, full of content and serenity, and then wandered back to the mirror. He leant gently back, and passed his fingers very softly over her brow and temples. For some seconds longer she gazed at herself with wide, enraptured eyes, and then, with one more glance of sweetly childlike weariness from beneath her heavy lashes, she fell asleep. Her head gradually sank on to her left shoulder, which she lifted gently to support it. Her mouth was slightly opened, her breath came loud and short. Oliver sat beside her a little while longer, looking old and careworn. Then, getting up, he carefully took the mirror from her lap, and placed it on the table again. After a while, he went to the little cupboard in the wall, sprinkled some special powder on a censer, and allowed it to burn on the table in the recess, close to the sleeping woman. A heavy, sweet smoke, with a soothing fragrance, filled the room.

When he had finished he went to Daniel Bart, who was in an adjoining room.

" The mistress will sleep very heavily to-day, Daniel. In an hour's time you will carry her to the turret chamber. I shall be there, and I shall take care that no one shall see you. But, in any case, you will cover her face and conceal her form. You had better carry her wrapped in an ample cloak."

Bart looked at him in horror.

"Master! Master! What are you going to do?" he cried. Oliver smiled faintly.

"Nothing dreadful, Daniel. The mistress even says it is good."

"Does the mistress know about it?" the man rejoined in astonishment. Oliver nodded.

"She only wishes to give the King the joy her mirror gives her, Daniel — nothing more."

"Holy Jesus!" cried Bart in horror; "what does that mean?"

Necker flung himself on Daniel's neck and groaned in his ear:

"The joy of death!"

OLIVER went to the King — pondering in his mind: Did I cry? For his sake? For the sake of his good love which hails from me? For the sake of his evil body, which will not allow me to get the upper hand? For my own sake? Yes and yes! For him and for me, it is all the same! But I surely bear more than he or she does — more? I am bearing them both towards the boundary! And yet both of them call me good. And even if I am not good, I would fain be good. I will try to be good; for I have to be many things; for him I have to be the man, and for her, Love. For a long while I have felt that I am proud of their praise. And if now I do them this last service — a difficult service, indeed — will he not give the man the crown and remain this side of the boundary — or will he be ready to die like a man? How much have I spared him and — myself?

Louis dined with his two friends. He looked intently at Oliver as he entered, but asked him no questions. The conversation turned on the birth of the Dauphin and its political consequences. Nevertheless, neither the King nor his two councillors spoke of any steps to be taken against Guienne. They seemed to shun all reference to the problem, and discussed chiefly the effect the news would have on Burgundy and his German campaign. They were all agreed that the most important object of their foreign policy must be to keep him fully occupied outside France by doing everything possible to complicate the situation for him. According to the King, anything in the nature of an unexpected

return of Burgundy from the east was now quite impossible, and, as for the people of Lorraine and the Swiss, steps had already been taken to prevent them from giving Burgundy any peace.

Necker said very little. It seemed to the King, who was observing him, that he was so deeply preoccupied with other problems that he was hardly listening. As soon as there was a pause in the conversation, Louis asked him:

"Have you anything to say, my friend?"

Oliver looked up sharply.

"No, Sire," he replied. "I am only silent because in your discussion of the great Charles of Burgundy anything I might have to say would be of no particular consequence. For I am bold enough to maintain that at the present moment I regard the person of the little Charles as more worthy of our consideration, and the problems connected with him more urgently in need of solution."

Louis looked at him in complete astonishment.

"Well, Oliver," he said in puzzled tones, "let me acknowledge that, for reasons which are not unknown to you, I begged our friends from the beginning to leave the Duke of Guienne out of it. I cannot help feeling a little bit surprised, my friend!"

"Why surprised, Sire?" Necker enquired with a friendly smile. "The joy of this day no more deserves to be diminished than does your laudable desire to scout for the nonce the hard realities of the political situation. But this does not compel you to bury your head in the sand. On the contrary, Sire, to-day seems to me the most favourable opportunity for dealing with the problem in a gracious mood and without thoughts of death. Far be it from me to suggest that it is possible to solve it in this way, Sire; but do you not owe it to this day at least to attempt such a solution?"

Louis, grave and distressed, stared in front of him. Oliver turned to the two ministers.

"We may arrive at a satisfactory solution, my lords," he said with some animation, "if we now carefully consider and discuss, with justice and without passion, all the political and diplomatic expedients whereby we may hope to nullify, as far as human effort can, the dangers threatening the throne and its heir from the quarter of Guienne. We shall not leave a

conditional use of force out of account, but only the unconditional use of force against the Duke's person or his life."

The councillors applied themselves eagerly to the problem, and, in keeping with their respective moral and professional predilections, suggested the most different solutions — Provost Tristan speaking as a lawyer, Jean de Beaune as a financier. The former wished to ensure the succession of the Dauphin by legal processes, the other by the payment of huge bribes. The King made no comment on either of the proposals, but his face showed no signs of brightening. Necker suggested tersely that the Duke of Guienne should be married to a lady of the House of Maine, and then placed on the throne of Anjou. Louis raised his head.

"Anjou is France," he said coldly. "If we do that, France will have her official opposition King, and will lose the advantage which I have made such sacrifices to win for her — the succession of my ruling House when old René of Anjou dies. By so doing I would jeopardise not only the Crown, but also the unity of the realm, which has ever been the one aim of my life."

"Then make him King of Sicily, Sire," Jean de Beaune suggested. Provost Tristan smiled.

"Why not King of Jerusalem?" he enquired. "That is even further away, and the Sultan would gladly promise us first to clip his long ears and then to cut his long neck."

Louis maintained his gravity. There was silence for a while. Suddenly Necker stood up.

"Will you allow me to leave you for a few minutes, Sire?" he asked without preamble. The King looked at him in surprise and nodded.

When Necker returned in a quarter of an hour, the discussion was still in progress. The two councillors were already far afield in the realm of political conjecture, and the Treasurer, in particular, had suggested the most extraordinary financial tactics for robbing the Duke of Guienne of his power. He even proposed that the members of his administration should be bribed wholesale, that at the same time a famine should be artificially created in his domain; and argued that, while this would deprive him of all means of succour, it would expose him to the dangers of an insurrection. The King gave Necker a quick glance of curiosity as he entered the room, and looked at him somewhat

anxiously, but remained silent and aloof as before. At last the two courtiers came to the end of their inspirations, for they not only felt discouraged by Louis' bearing, but were also conscious of no longer having Oliver's support.

"Is the flood of your wisdom dried up?" the King enquired, with a smile, as he rose to his feet. "Would either one of you two good souls seriously maintain that he had provided me with the weapon against my brother's ambitious and rebellious spirit?"

The two, overcome with embarrassment, remained silent. The King went over to the door.

"Allow me to tell you, comrades," he said gravely, "there is nothing that can guarantee us against the evil will of a man so long as he is alive! Good-night, friends! Come, Oliver!"

They went to the tower. Louis crossed the work-room excitedly, glanced furtively at the door in the panelling, which was closed, then, dropping into his chair, buried his head in his hands.

"Surely we had made up our minds not to speak of death, brother!" he murmured. Necker was leaning against the wall, close to the sliding panel.

"We spoke of life, Sire!" he replied emphatically. The King shook his head and did not look up.

"You surely know that it cannot be saved, Oliver!"

"Which life can be saved, Sire?"

Louis winced and hunched his back, clasping his fingers above his head, as if to prevent it from bursting, and in rebellious tones groaned between clenched teeth:

"Every life . . . every life . . . every life . . ."

Suddenly his hands dropped on the table, and he turned slowly towards Necker. His eyes opened wide and seemed to shine with knowledge, and his lips moved as if to frame a question. But all he did was to smile a bewitching smile. Whereupon, rising calmly to his feet, with all the strength of a happy, confident man, he strode into the middle of the room and, beaming with joy, raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Every life, brother!" he cried jubilantly, as if his eyes could pierce the beams, "every life!"

Oliver raised a hand to the panelling. His face was white

and slightly drawn, as if he were restraining a laugh or a sob, and his lips looked bloodless.

"Try it, Sire!" he said slowly, speaking as if with difficulty. "I shall try also."

He pulled the panel door carefully aside, and laid a finger to his lips. The King nodded, and stepped past him through the opening in the wall; then, turning hastily round again, he kissed him.

"I release both yourself and myself from the need of compassing a brother's death," he whispered solemnly, "from every death. . . . Come what may!"

Oliver's lips parted in a smile of pain, and he was silent. Louis stole softly up the twenty blessed steps of the winding stair.

Anne was lying on her back asleep. Her lips were slightly parted, and her head had dropped a little to one side. Her breath came fast and loud. Her face, neck and hands gleamed pale and white. Louis knelt down beside her, and let his eyes wander from head to foot over her prostrate form. He touched her hair and her temples with his lips . . . and then turned suddenly round in alarm. Necker was standing behind him.

"Oliver . . ."

Necker raised his hand, and his face was grave and sad.

"Sire," he whispered, "that is no longer a body that can feel, or be touched. You know that!"

"But she is still alive, Oliver . . ."

"She is alive only for our eyes, for our eyes and her own. Sire, can your goodness be so great as to preserve this life?"

The King bowed his head lower and lower until he buried his face in the dark skins of the bed.

"Yes, Oliver, I shall not disturb her sleep, or her waking hours. I will kill no more, brother. . . ."

Deeply moved and quivering with excitement, Necker gave an imploring cry.

"Look at me, Sire!"

With a great effort Louis raised his head.

"You are weeping, Sire. Have you ever wept before? You are a good man now. . . ."

He knelt beside the King and kissed his hand.

"I am an old man," said Louis softly, "and it seems to me it is all for the best."

Suddenly he clasped Oliver's arm.

"The King does not wish to kill any more," he groaned in anguish. Necker smiled a strange smile.

"The man does not wish to kill any more, Sire, and I belong to the man as well as to the King. . . ."

Louis took Oliver's head between his hands and looked into his eyes long and earnestly. "We do not know each other to the depths, brother," he murmured at last, "and it is as well. Otherwise God would have no purpose."

They were silent. Anne stirred in her sleep, and smiled at the image of herself in the mirror. Then she grew grave once more — ay, even sad, tormented by gloomy phantoms. Her breast rose and fell quickly, and she threw out her arms as if in self-defence.

"Have you really been crying, Oliver?" she stammered in silvery tones. Louis raised his face, which was solemn and set.

"Why have you been crying, Oliver?" he asked sadly. Necker looked into his eyes.

"For you, Sire. For I did not know that you could cry."

"I did not know it myself, Oliver. . . ."

"Give me the mirror . . ." gasped the dreamy form on the bed, and once more she gazed upon her happiness. Her face was radiant with a joy that was not of this world, and smiled without stirring. To the spellbound King her smile seemed pale as her skin.

"Now leave me alone with my eyes, Oliver," he pleaded.

EVEN Duke Charles of Guienne came to attend the christening festivities at the Queen's palace. The events of the last year, during which the King, with almost incredible energy and unaccustomed luck, had destroyed the League, had so seriously impaired the Duke's bodily and mental health that d'Urfé, his shrewd minister, had felt compelled, despite the perilous venture of the step, to renew the alliance with Brittany and Burgundy, if only in order to lend fresh life to the young prince. The Queen's pregnancy and the birth of the Dauphin caused great excitement in the neighbouring states, and so stimulated thoughts of counter measures that d'Urfé, who believed in the

possibility of an upheaval in the near future, was, as an experienced politician, careful to reassure the King with every sign of loyalty. Thus Duke Charles was not allowed a moment's hesitation in accepting his brother's invitation, and was obliged to greet the heir to the throne with becoming expressions of joy. And as his personal ambition, which had never been great, was incapable of surviving his dread of his powerful brother and the nervous strain of the last few months, and as he was completely unadapted to play the momentous part of leader of the League, he found it by no means difficult to conceal his feelings as Pretender to the throne and to appear resigned.

He found the King a paragon of clarity, good nature and serenity, and both he and d'Urfé, whose sharp eyes nothing escaped, noticed that all his customary shiftiness and diabolical trickery had vanished. In both his conversation and bearing towards his brother, Louis, to their great surprise, seemed to be as little concerned with any political aim as he was with any thought of intrigue. Charlotte, who was no fool, received Duke Charles with a look of compassion, and observed him and the King closely. Deeply stirred by her own tragic part throughout the affair, she turned to *Sieur le Mauvais*, whom she greeted as a friend, and whose company she eagerly sought, and said:

"Is it possible for royal hypocrisy to go so far?"

"No, madam," replied Oliver gravely. "It is not possible. The King has attained to a state of goodness, which hitherto he has never known, and which is giving him great joy."

Charlotte raised herself in her chair, and her astonishment lent a certain attraction to her face.

"Then the King over there is not talking to a man doomed to death?"

"Oh, yes, he is, your Majesty," said Necker softly. The Queen bowed her head in distress.

"What do you mean, then, Messire? How can I believe in his goodness, if, after all, he intends to kill?"

Oliver looked at her lofty brow.

"The King is obliged to kill," he murmured; "but the old man you see over there is really a kind man and is not thinking of fratricide. Louis does not know that he is speaking to a doomed man."

Charlotte glanced at him in horror.

"Who does know it, then, Messire?" she enquired with trembling lips. Necker's eyes were sad.

"You yourself, most gracious lady, and — I — "

Charlotte's hands rose fluttering from the arms of her chair like a pair of frightened doves. Then she folded them again.

"The Lord have mercy on your soul and forgive and reward you, Messire," she said piously. Oliver smiled in anguish and was silent, and the Queen looked at him with searching, thoughtful eyes.

"How long will he remain a good man?" she asked suddenly.

"As long as he remains a man that loves with a love that is pure."

"Anne . . ." Charlotte gasped with white lips, and shrugged her shoulders. Oliver closed his eyes, as if the name stung him, too.

"As long as the sick woman continues to live," he murmured.

"And how much longer will she live?"

Necker passed a hand across his brow and stared beyond her into space.

"That is the divine symbol of the circle," he answered mysteriously. "As long as he is good."

The Queen glanced quickly round and, bending forward with a rapid movement, touched the hand that hung at Oliver's side with her lips. Oliver winced, but he made no sign of surprise or satisfaction that might wound her.

Occasionally the King cast a glance of anxiety at Necker, particularly when he happened to be speaking to Charles of Guienne. But he asked him no questions, nor did he allow even a thought of suspicion or uneasiness to enter his mind. Oliver, who from time to time caught the King looking at him thus, always met his eye with the clear and open countenance of a man who has nothing to conceal. And then Louis would bow his head. During the farewell banquet which was given in honour of the guests, Necker officiated as cup-bearer to the King and the Duke of Guienne, and throughout the evening Louis seemed unable to rid himself of certain secret qualms. He was quieter and more absent-minded than usual on such solemn occasions, his mouth was drawn in an expression of uneasiness, almost of pain,

and his eyes often rested long and earnestly on his laughing brother, out of whose head the King's friendliness and the agreeable experiences of his visit had driven all thought of politics. Suddenly, prompted by a terrible thought, Louis raised his head, for he saw Necker standing behind his brother and staring with ill-omened eyes at his neck. Guienne raised the goblet which the cup-bearer had just filled. A sudden feeling of horror choked the King, and he stretched out his hand wildly.

"Your health, Sire!" said Charles, not understanding the gesture.

"Stop!" gasped the King — and forcing himself to smile, he seized his brother's goblet and pushed his own towards him. "Stop, brother! Let us exchange cups, and drink to a happy future from each other's goblets."

Guienne, feeling flattered, smiled and drank out of Louis' golden goblet. The King seized the other goblet and cast a piercing glance at Necker. Oliver replied with a calm look of surprise. Louis blushed and drank. Then, with a serene expression, he passed a hand over his brow.

"You keep my goblet, brother," he said kindly, "and I will keep yours. It will remind me of the hour in which my thoughts were those of a brother. Do you observe, Charles, that this time my words are different from what they were when last we met?"

"You have always behaved as a brother to me," replied Guienne uneasily, glancing at d'Urfé. Louis raised his eyebrows as if in pain.

"Alas, Charles," he said gently, "I have never been anything of the sort, nor have you. There are moments in the lives of men, particularly of old men, when they can understand only goodness, and when they not only do not grasp evil, but even forget it. I would fain believe that I am living through such a wondrous time now. I would fain believe that I can be like a brother. It rests with you now, Charles, only with you, to give internal peace both to our House and to our realm. Make it peace, brother!"

He felt Oliver's eyes upon him, and raised his head. He marvelled at the depths of compassion he saw in them. Why do you blame me? the King seemed to ask as he smiled sadly at his Chamberlain. Necker turned away.

Duke Charles was writhing in anguish. All the sluices of mistrust and fear had been thrown open in his soul. Is he trying to catch me again now? his agonised brain enquired. Is he once more pursuing his old tactics, in this underhand way? What is he doing, and how can I save myself?

"I was ever your loyal brother, Sire," he stammered, "and shall ever be so. But . . ."

Even Pierre d'Urfé now began to fidget uneasily in his seat.

"Monseigneur will have carefully to reconsider the duties of his rights as Heir Presumptive in the light of his political position," he observed with some embarrassment. "But he promises you, Sire, that he will give you every possible guarantee of loyalty."

The King turned pale and compressed his lips. With silent and unfathomable contempt he gazed first at the one and then at the other. Whereupon looking up at Necker once more, he met his compassionate eyes. But search as he might, he saw nothing more. Nor in himself either could he discover aught else — no thought of hardness, no suggestion of political reprisals. He was conscious only of feeling tired and worried, and of wishing to stir up neither the past nor the future. So he changed the subject, discussing and listening to matters of no moment. Nor did he again look up at his cup-bearer. But his senses, which once again stole towards Necker, and followed his movements, made his heart beat wildly. He examined his brother's ashen features.

"How are you feeling?" he asked in a gentle voice.

"I feel very well, Sire."

ABOUT a week after his return to his quarters in La Rochelle, Duke Charles complained of a feeling of unusual heaviness in the limbs, and of stinging pains in the region of the heart. Shortly afterwards he sank into a long, strange sleep. Forty-eight hours later he died of heart failure, before the doctors had been able to recall him to consciousness even for a few seconds. The *post mortem* examination did not confirm d'Urfé's suspicion that he had been poisoned. No trace of any poison known to the medical science of the period could be found, nor any signs of the typical inflammation in any of his organs.

When the King heard the news of his death, he remained strangely calm and immediately gave necessary orders for forces to march into Guienne and seize the dukedom as having lapsed to the Crown. Necker heard no faltering in his voice and could see not the smallest change in his bearing. Only his face was perhaps a little paler and his cheeks less firm. But the work of the brain behind his white forehead seemed to Oliver, as he observed him, to strike a dangerous contrast to his outward reserve. During the day Louis did not speak to him of the thoughts in his mind, and made no further reference to Charles's death other than its political consequences and considerations of state seemed to demand. But in the evening, when they were together in his work-room in the tower, he struggled silently for a long while with the emotions which were stirring within him. Oliver did not disturb him.

"I wonder whether it was a good thing," the King began softly, making an effort to frame his question. "I wonder whether it was a good thing that conscience should have separated itself from me."

Necker did not reply. When he had placed the apple containing the secret poison, prepared according to an esoteric formula from vegetable toxins and alkaloids, on Charles's plate, and had seen him eat the fruit, the thoughts and feelings which moved him — love, compassion, and self-sacrifice for the King — seemed to congeal into a physically painful, cold mass freezing his soul. It was not a feeling of guilt or of repentance, it was the misery of solitude; for from that moment he knew that he had crossed the boundary and that he was alone without the King — no, that he alone was the King without Louis the man. He yearned for the man and for that which he had given the man, but he refrained from revealing his yearning, so that Louis might not share the guilt and thus be torn from his human happiness. Now he was silent because he was afraid he might be weak or beckon Louis over to him.

"I wonder whether it was a good thing," Louis repeated. "Am I, then, guiltless?"

"You are quite guiltless, Sire," Oliver said quickly and firmly. The King shook his head slowly.

"Shall I then be guilty, brother? You see, I do not know. And must I not be grateful?"

Necker made no reply, but he felt his heart beating faster.

"Must I not be grateful?" the King asked again, with strange persistence. "Do you believe that I shall be?"

"Yes," Oliver replied softly. Louis looked at him; his eyes were like caverns.

"Do you know me better, then, than I have known you?" he muttered. "Brother, truly I did not know how far you would go for me. Do you think that I can go as far? Do you know me to the depths, brother?"

"No," said Oliver sadly. "And 'twere better you should not wish to go as far as I have. . . ."

Louis stood up and went over to him.

"Is the road so long?" he asked with a smile. "And don't you think I could find the way to you? Do you want to be alone, Oliver?"

Necker bowed his head and did not dare to answer. In friendly tones and without further ado Louis bade him "Good-night," and sliding back the panel door, went upstairs to the sick woman, who ever since the birth of the Dauphin had slept in the turret chamber.

That night about three o'clock Oliver was roused from slumber by the touch of a hand. The King stood before him. The wax torch quivered in his fingers, and his body shook under his loose cloak as though he were shivering with cold. Yet great beads of sweat shone on his brow. Oliver, uncertain whether he were not still dreaming a nightmare, shut his eyes again in horror.

"Come," said Louis in a voice completely changed. Necker leapt out of bed and rubbed his eyes. In the light of the torch he hardly recognised the King's face. It was grey and old, distorted in the flickering shadows, the sockets were like great dark caverns without the light of the eyes, his mouth was twisted with pain, and his cheeks quivered so violently that Oliver was unable to frame his question.

"Come quickly, brother," Louis urged. Necker threw on a fur cloak and ran through the rooms and passages to the tower, through the open panel door and up the winding stair. The bed was all disarranged, and Anne, her face almost blue, was lying unconscious on the skins. Oliver bent over her and saw that under the silk covering she was naked. He groaned and raised

his clenched fist to heaven. The King stood in the doorway, his face all drawn and his lustreless eyes unrecognisable.

"Yes," he said slowly, raising his hands in supplication, "have you the courage to kill me? You have not, brother. . ."

Oliver looked at him with dark reproach in his eyes, but did not answer. He turned to the sick woman and, baring her breast, bent down to listen. Her breathing was heavy and her heart beats shook the whole wall of her chest, while the veins in her neck throbbed madly. Necker soothed her, stroking her brow, her temples, her cheeks and her arteries with his magnetic fingers. Gently he raised her lids, put his face close to hers and gazed deep into her eyes. Her heart began to beat less violently. He drew himself up and she awoke. She turned her head feebly to right and left, and then looked at him.

"Oliver!" she gasped, and tried to smile.

Then she turned to the King and gazed at him gravely, reproachfully.

"Oliver . . . !" She called him that, too.

With trembling fingers she pointed to Necker, as though to a good example. Louis nodded obediently, his mouth twisted and mute. Oliver, his head in his arms, stifled a groan.

Anne opened her eyes; she seemed gently excited, and as it were surprised, and raising her hand feebly, pointed to the ceiling mirror.

"What joy, Oliver!" she whispered in rapture, "what joy is coming to me, Oliver. . . ."

Her eyes, her face and her voice smiled, and as she fell asleep, her skin seemed to smile. Necker raised his head and looked first at her and then at the King. Louis met his gaze.

"Those words of thanksgiving were out of this world," Oliver said slowly; "but I have perhaps deserved them."

Louis timidly drew nearer.

"Could you bear to be alone, brother?" he asked gently. "And could I know what is good without you? What would it avail us if I only knew that you are better than I am, but had you not? The road to you was not so far, Oliver — and then, brother — you called me — and I did so love Anne!"

Necker, overcome with emotion, seized the King's hands.

"That is the boundary, Sire! It had to be so. Whether it were love, or hate, or punishment, or sacrifice. It *was*, Sire, and

we no longer have to suffer it or to sound its depths. Now we shall have nothing more except ourselves — and then . . .”

“Oliver! Oliver!” lisped the dreaming woman in weak yet joyful tones, “what is the King to me. . . .?”

Necker and Louis started in alarm.

“Who is the King for you?” Louis asked in agony. “I, still only I?”

Oliver shook his head.

“No,” he said kindly — “lovelessness. . . .”

He put his ear to her breast. He could hardly hear the beating of her heart.

“Her end is easy and beautiful,” he whispered, and looked at the King. “Why do you fear death, Sire?”

Drawing himself up to his full height, Louis threw out his arms as if he were afraid and wished to protect himself.

“What is this death to the King?” he exclaimed. “And why do you say this? Why do you not help me against it?”

Oliver allowed Anne’s wrist to drop.

“I will help you, Sire. But whose life can be preserved?”

“The King’s life!”

Waves of light seemed to be passing over Anne’s face like the sweet soft rays of the moon. Her childish hand pointed once more heavenwards and her lips moved, but they could no longer frame a word. For one brief moment her eyelids were raised, revealing the golden gleam of her eyes with a far-away look of bliss. But she could see naught here below, while from between her slightly parted lips came a shrill short note, soft and silvery as from the string of a lute gently touched.

“What is that?” Louis asked very softly, and listened.

“It is the joy of death,” replied Oliver with a smile.

Towards morning Anne’s heart had ceased to beat.

BOOK THREE

Chapter I

THE ANIMALS

THE YEARS beyond the boundary grew ever harder, colder and sterner for the two solitary souls, leading them as it were ever further and further from the sun. The years rolled by ever more quickly, as though to stay the passing of time the sun must needs shine on the earth and warm the blood of its creatures, holding back and lengthening the day, with the warmth of life and the weight of things gone by. As the King, who resolutely turned away from the past and became strangely averse even to memory, refused to regard age as a gift bestowed upon him and took no pains to enjoy it, and as Necker, who remained faithful to him, never spoke to him of what had been, or of the evanescence of man, they did not reckon the years according to the length of their own lives, but, like immortals, haughtily paid no heed to them. And yet Louis was now quite white and Necker grey. Age and the hardness of his calling as King had dried Louis up like a rocky peak, wearing away the soft and sensuous curves of his face and leaving it sharp and bony, while his skin was full of wrinkles and his full lips had grown thin and hard. Oliver's gaunt features had resisted the ravages of time like a hard stone. His face had always been bony and deeply lined, but it was now greyer and the furrows were deeper. The King had grown to look like Necker, but Necker had not grown to look like the King. They were now as like as two brothers, except that their eyes, which in both were equally fine, no longer had the same expression. The King's no longer changed from an expression of coldness to one of goodness, and seemed to have grown lighter; often too they looked quite dim. Oliver's dark eyes were always sad — whether in rest, at work, or in moments of brutality.

Louis' will to keep death at arm's length had driven his misanthropic and suspicious habits of mind to extremes. Matters had become so bad that he could no longer endure to look on the houses of the town from the windows of the castle. And

accordingly, together with Oliver, his other friends, the Scottish Archers, and the smallest possible staff of attendants, he retired to the lonely and inaccessible fortress of Plessis-les-Tours, and with the frenzy of a madman who imagines he is being persecuted, strengthened it with the most formidable defences. In order to make it even more secure, he strictly forbade any one to approach it, and punished with death all who disobeyed — that is to say, all who, unaware of the dangers, had not already fallen victims to the thousand and one pitfalls, man-traps and automatic spring-guns that lay hidden about the approaches to the castle. And it was from this stronghold that, with Oliver at his side, he directed the affairs of the realm with a sharp eye and a hard hand. As deaf to the groans of his oppressed people as he was blind to their heroic obedience, he guided the country's destinies with skill and certainty, and displayed so deep a knowledge of every political factor that the people — filled with mingled admiration and horror — regarded the omniscience of their invisible monarch as the result of his alliance with Antichrist, and secretly called him by the name of his strange friend and adviser. It was as if these two devils, from their rocky fastness far removed from human ken, swayed the destinies of Europe. Events no longer took them by surprise, for they themselves brought them about and awaited results with the assurance of alchemists. The fruit of their long years of work had grown ripe — Charles of Burgundy, at the height of his power, had already succeeded in turning his allies of Milan and Anjou against the Valois, when he fell headlong into the trap that had long been laid for him between Franche-Comté and Vaud, and, staggered by two mighty blows from his own confederates, he was pounced on by all the curs in Christendom who answered Louis' call. Just as he was trying to shake off the Duke of Lorraine, who had laid fast hold on Nancy, he was betrayed by Campobasso, and at the same time suddenly attacked by an army bigger than his own which had marched up to relieve his enemy. A wild mob of soldiers stampeded across his lines and, not recognising him in the confusion, trod his fallen body in the mud. And thus the war-god became one poor, naked, lacerated corpse among thousands.

The King had established posts all over the country the chief object of which was to convey the royal despatches. Thus

the news of Charles's death reached Plessis within the space of a few days. Necker gave the messenger a purse of silver, and went in search of the King, who, when he was not with his animals, used to spend his time in the vast library. He found him bent over a precious copy of the Vulgate, which had been prepared at his command in Master Ulrich Gering's workshop in Paris. For the King set great store by the new art of printing, which had come from the wilds of Germany; he had immediately recognised its immense importance, and had persuaded the Sorbonne to provide a workshop for the German master.

Louis looked up and immediately asked:

"News from Lorraine?"

"Burgundy is dead," replied Necker calmly.

"Dead!" the King repeated softly, leaning back in his chair. "Killed, you mean killed in battle. My Larron is also dead; but he died; he must have overeaten himself."

Larron was a crane, and the cleverest and most talkative of all the birds. He was the stern though never spiteful chief of the spacious aviary in the zoological gardens which Louis had laid out at the back of the castle, the superintendence of which afforded him endless amusement. Louis had always loved animals, particularly birds and dogs, and even at Amboise the cages and kennels had always been full and well tended. When he crossed the boundary with his misanthropy, he took his love of animals with him, as a necessary complement. All that was left of his emotions was concentrated in his joy over his birds, dogs and horses. The spiritual reactions of the early years, and the way Necker shared his joy, had transmuted his native tendency to contemplation into an active need for pure friendship with dumb creatures. He was kinder to them than he had ever been to men — except to Anne and Oliver — and with them he recovered from the strain and stress of political preoccupations. To all chirruping, barking and neighing creatures he gave names, and fed them himself, feeling almost grateful for their confidence and the solace of their hungry bright-eyed eagerness every day. He had had a light and airy glass aviary built for the birds, over which the crane Larron ruled. It was divided into two halves. One half, which was only closed at night, contained the larger, tamer birds, Louis' special friends — common cranes, demoiselles, and crowned cranes, carrying their strong lithe

bodies, their long, thin necks and their small long-billed heads gracefully on their stiff legs. They were at once clever and foolish, majestically thoughtful and wildly idiotic, skipping around shrieking strange and intelligible noises alternately. In this same section were the little owls with their sulphur-coloured eyes, the unruly eagle owls, night owls with their deep brown eyes that shunned the light, grimacing barn-owls, with engaging manners and always ready for a joke, and friendly, talkative brown-eyed starlings. In the other half of the aviary lived the singing birds, larks, thrushes, tomtits, chaffinches, wagtails and yellow-hammers. When Louis acquired a rare specimen of the bunting breed, with wonderful black and yellow plumage, he christened it Anne. Oliver started back in alarm when he heard the King call the name for the first time.

"Isn't the bird rare and beautiful enough?" Louis enquired calmly, on seeing his consternation.

During the day the dogs were allowed to run about free in the park, the castle and the various courtyards. There were greyhounds from Persia, Italy and Scotland, German, Danish, English and Corsican bulldogs, Spanish dachshunds and English hounds. Their chief, who was held in profound respect and awe, was a magnificent huge Tibetan bitch called Tristan, who had been presented to the King by the Sultan. Without her, Louis would daily have run the risk of being injured at feeding time by the barking, jumping, yapping gratitude of the rest. She would obey only the King or Necker, and enjoyed the privilege of sleeping in the castle, outside Louis' bedroom door.

The horses were provided with broad grazing meadows, newly built stabling, a well-trained staff of stable-hands inside the park. The noble grace, supple strength and mild eyes of the valuable Arabian, Berber, Turkestan and Persian breeds filled the King with fresh joy every day. A wonderfully lithe, cream-coloured Nejd mare, with fairylike eyes, springy fetlocks, silky mane, and a beautifully curved neck, which she arched like a deer's when she was at full trot, was called Anne.

"Why that name?" Oliver had asked him, shaking his head, slightly vexed. "Why that name again? Is not the bunting enough?"

"No, my friend," Louis replied with calm decision, "my

bunting is the voice of her soul, but my Nejd is of the same race as the five mares which the prophet loved, and has the marvellous grey of her eyes. Her name is Anne."

He also possessed horses of European breed — fine specimens from Limoges, Navarre, and Calvados, Cleveland and York, Naples, Denmark and Andalusia. There were cart horses from Percheron and Flanders. They all bore the names of enemies whom the King had overcome — Edward, Juan of Aragon, Armagnac, Nemours, St. Pol, Francis of Brittany, Philip of Savoy, and the like. With the pertinacity of the monomaniac, the King called them by the great names to be found on the grave-stones marking the miles along his life-road.

"Why do you use these names?" Oliver had enquired with astonishment in the early days at Plessis. Louis seemed to hesitate in his reply, like a man who dreads being misunderstood.

"In order to forget mankind," he said at last slowly; and when he saw that Oliver was still unconvinced, he nodded emphatically. "Yes, my friend, in order to substitute new concepts and new associations for the harm which they did me and I did them." Then, with a frown, he whispered: "Moments of weakness might overtake me, when my heart would lie open, and the poison of the men so named might enter dangerously into my being. At such moments, Oliver, I call my beloved animals and they destroy the human shape memory gives to their names, and overcome it with the power of their concrete reality and presence. Yes, Oliver, and they do it with the Christian power which makes good stronger than evil."

Necker, dumb with amazement, only shrugged his shoulders, while a faint shudder shook his frame. But he seemed to have understood the King, and never once enquired why there was no horse bearing the name of his brother Charles.

When Louis, with his own hands, buried Larron, the crane, in the little cemetery which had been made for the animals amid a group of cypress trees in the park, and had re-christened a black Dongola horse of the name of Sforza, Carolus Audax, he proceeded to carry out the great political programme which was to come into force as soon as the Duke of Burgundy was dead and which he and Necker had long ago worked out to the smallest detail. The whole of the Somme area, Artois and Hainault,

and the former estates of the Constable, were immediately occupied, after offering but little resistance, and in a few weeks the King was lord of most of the French-speaking districts of Greater Burgundy. Whereupon Anjou quickly concluded the final treaty appointing Louis his heir. From the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees to the Pas de Calais and Flanders, Louis' sceptre now held sway. The unity of France had been achieved. Nevertheless the King was not satisfied, and began laying new and grandiose schemes before Necker. He proposed the betrothal of the nine-year-old Dauphin to Maria of Burgundy, who was then twenty, thus hoping to merge the whole of the Burgundian state, from Holland to Savoy, in France. Oliver shook his head.

"That will not do, Sire," he said. "You will only create for yourself, in the person of the Emperor, a more formidable foe than Burgundy ever was."

The old King gazed into space — into the future.

"Some such settlement is bound to come, brother," he said slowly, "but it will take over five hundred years. I must prepare the ground. . . ."

He was silent for a moment; then suddenly looking into Necker's eyes, he said gently:

"Oliver, you must go to Ghent and have audience with Maria, who is living there, and if the girl and her advisers turn a deaf ear to you, bring me the keys of the town."

Necker was taken aback, but a moment later he doubted whether Louis was really serious.

"Yes, you must go to Ghent, Oliver," he repeated, "and as occasion demands, you must be either the ambassador of France, or plain Necker of Thielt."

Oliver shook his head dubiously.

"The people of Ghent have the devil in their guts, Sire."

"Quite so," said Louis with a fleeting smile, "that is why you are the right man for them."

"Sire," said Oliver very gravely, "thanks to Péronne, the myth of my death is no longer believed in Ghent, or in France either, unfortunately — and its place has been taken by the myth that I am the King's devil here. The man who was the first to know that I did not die on my journey to Brussels with the other delegates is now the leader of all the powerful Burgundian party, and chief magistrate of the town. So it is quite possible,

Sire, that while they may raise their hats to the French ambassador, they will shoot Necker, the disloyal citizen of Thielt, dead. Do you wish to risk it, Sire?"

"No!" said Louis emphatically. A little while later, however, Oliver himself returned to the King's proposal.

"I have heard," he told the King, who listened with eager interest, "that the Independent Party in Ghent has made great progress and won considerable freedom of action as the result of Charles's death. If you will be content with the desertion of both Ghent and Flanders from the dominion of Burgundy and will abandon the idea of annexation, *Sieur le Mauvais* — not plain Necker of Thielt — will go to the town: the Count of Meulan will go there, provided *le Mauvais* of Péronne and Liége fame is still esteemed at his proper value."

Louis had listened with some anxiety.

"But will *le Mauvais* return to me?" he enquired after a while. "The King needs him more than Flanders in order to go on living! Who will guarantee that you will not be recognised, and that no harm will befall you?"

Necker shrugged his shoulders.

"Do not let us speak of guarantees, Sire," he said coldly, "and let us think out precautionary measures. Send a body of troops into Hainault, on the frontier of Flanders, strong enough to defend Ghent against a punitive expedition from Burgundy, should necessity arise. In the event of Ghent's desertion, they could remain neutral. If you do that, nothing untoward is likely to happen to me."

The King nodded. And when a few days later Oliver was taking his leave, he asked softly:

"Are you happy, brother; like any other little bourgeois who is going to see his old home again?"

"Yes," said Oliver. Louis in distress passed a hand over his brow.

"Shall I make you independent governor of Flanders, brother?"

Necker laughed aloud.

"Do you wish to found a dynasty of the ruling House of Necker, Sire?" Then he added gravely: "*Le Mauvais* needs the King more than Flanders in order to go on living."

Louis kissed him.

"To go on living!" he whispered, obviously distressed. "But you will not desert me, even in death, will you?"

"No, Sire!"

Ghent was not a virtuous city. The rebellious spirit of its people was not lulled. Ghent forgot nothing, and suffered without objection the mating of hospitality and extortion of homage and violence, God and the Devil. Ghent always loved only heirs apparent, only the future, which it was ready to master, and always hated the existing ruler, the present, whom it not only mastered, but against whom it was also in a constant state of struggle, both with its rebellious mind and also with an unexpected display of muscle. Thus Ghent had loved Charles the Bold when he was still Count of Charolais, and was almost constantly at loggerheads with his father. It therefore loved Burgundy's fair young daughter, because she was friendly, full of majesty and grace, and yet only a weak maiden. The news of the Duke's death chimed in the peals that welcomed her to the town, and already the bells of St. Jacob and St. Bavon were ringing more like a dirge and boding no good. A secret shudder, as it were, convulsed the town, and was followed by strange movements, midnight meetings of parties and guilds, the transport of arms, and the mobilisation of all who were fit to serve. Pieter Heuriblocq, whose appointment as chief magistrate of the town some years previously the Duke had acknowledged by setting free the eight members of the Ghentish delegation who had been imprisoned in Brussels, went, full of anxiety and foreboding, to hold consultation with his fellow magistrates and the members of the pro-Burgundian party. A night attack which was intended to put an end to the leaders of the Independents failed, and the gang of spies were driven back with broken heads. But the storm did not burst even now. The insurgents were apparently uncertain as to the strength, readiness and whereabouts of the remnants of the Burgundian army and, unable to reckon on similar movements in the other towns of Flanders, feared the consequences of a premature or badly organised outburst. Heuriblocq was on the point of informing Maria's advisers, the Government administrators, Chancellor Humbercourt, the successor to Crève-cœur (who was dead) and the Grand Chamberlain, Melchior van Busleyden, that the situation was extremely threatening,

and advising the immediate departure of the young princess and a military occupation of the town, when a French herald quite unexpectedly presented himself and announced the arrival of the Count of Meulan, as ambassador from the King, bearing important overtures of peace for the Princess and the honourable municipal council of the city of Ghent. The general excitement created by this news served only to increase the tension, which was on the point of leading to definite action. Each of the three groups — the Princess and her two ministers, who dreaded a military occupation of Brabant, Heuriblocq and the pro-Burgundian party, and the Guilds and the radical faction — expected from the Valois' representative not merely a promise of good will, but also actual support.

Oliver left the Grand Master's strong body of troops a little way north of Tournai, close to the frontier between the Walloon- and Flemish-speaking provinces. Twenty Scottish Archers, men who had been personally selected by the King, and had pledged their word to protect the person of the Master with their own life-blood, and a number of other armed retainers accompanied him, while a few officers were secretly posted at Ronsse, Oudenarde and Gavre, to maintain the lines of communication. By means of these well-mounted outposts the Grand Master might, if the need arose, be given the alarm in a few hours.

When Necker, who had put on a false grey beard, cut to a point, was riding through his native province, he experienced to the full the pure and simple joys of seeing home again. He was pleased when his eyes rested on the windmills, the flat corn-fields, the bleaching grounds of the linen-weavers, the primitive brick churches in the villages, with their familiar harsh-sounding bells. It gave him a curious feeling of joy, almost of pride, that such sensations should come freely and naturally to him. The King could not have felt them, he thought to himself, silently smiling over his advantage. He turned to Daniel Bart, who, dressed in a stately uniform and wearing a black beard, rode at his side as his lieutenant.

"There is our home, Daniel," he observed in a friendly voice. "Aren't you glad to see it again?"

Bart laughed brutally.

"We two are not exactly looking for our lost children,

Master, and our mission, our baggage and the forces covering our rear are not signs of home-sickness, are they? As a matter of fact, Master, I am quite pleased to be humbugging Ghent's smug citizens again, but the possibility of being recognised as a native and being drawn and quartered does not appeal to me quite so much. That would be a bit too painfully sentimental!"

Oliver bowed his head in distress. Even his servant could not rejoice! Even Daniel had forgotten his own heart! What a change had come over Bart since Anne's death, when a look of unspeakable woe and lines of pain had been stamped on his features, as he carried her body in his giant arms under his cloak out of the tower. His face had worn that look ever since and a strange wildness had characterised him, a sort of frenzied sense of his own strength, a blend of pugnacity and waywardness, a secretly accumulated arsenal of evil and brutality, so that Necker could no longer endure his unruly presence and had appointed him steward of the large estate near Paris which he owed to the King's bounty. Bart managed the property with all the arts of the born tyrant, who succeeds in compensating his own lack of discipline by a violent subordination of his dependents, and he was all the more merciless in forcing his ideas of obedience and order upon them, seeing that his mighty body ran riot with him. But all this was merely another form of love for his master, and he never forgot that he was his servant. He only intoxicated himself with the thought of his own physical strength, to which his master laid no claim. But he handed over the gains he derived from his extortionate administration to the uttermost farthing, either deliberately or honestly overlooking the fact that Necker paid as little heed to them as he did to the way he exercised his authority. He continued, as a matter of course, to be, as he always had been, his master's faithful companion and servant on any official or secret mission with which Oliver was entrusted, although such missions had of late grown rare. Oliver shook his head. Even his servant was no longer capable of feeling joy! While he himself, the older he grew, and the further he felt himself removed from ordinary mortals, was filled with an ever more passionate longing for the emotions of the human heart, and he loved the joys of the humble. Was he battenning on the creatures of his own begetting and the des-

tinies prepared for them, like Saturn who devoured his own offspring?

The thought hung like a black cloud over the bright and charming landscape. As they approached Ghent from the south, he saw the grey walls and the gloomy oval of the Château des Comtes, the two sinister towers of the Rabot, the great lowering square tower of the Belfry, and the solemn unearthly silhouettes of the churches. "I come from no cheerful town," he mused with a frown, "that is no home for a heart!"

The Princess received him in the castle, delighting in the ceremony. She possessed all the charm and majesty of bearing which proved her to be her father's daughter, while her features, which combined Charles's noble lines with the softer beauty of her Bourbon mother, were radiant with the glamour of youth. Calm and composed and fully conscious of the impression she made, her presence added to the magnificence of the spectacle. The Count of Meulan, clad in the magnificent costume of a French nobleman, was quick to note the details of the picturesque scene—the fair maiden on the excessively large throne, endowed with greater dignity and glamour by her own beauty and magic grace than by the crown she wore, the dais and the canopy; and the fine heads and uniforms of the Burgundian nobles who stood on either side of her. Oliver caught Busleyden's thoughtful eye carefully surveying him, and smiled inwardly. After the formal greetings were over, and Oliver had delivered his credentials, the Princess invited him, as was usual at official receptions and formal ceremonies, to deliver his message. The Count of Meulan, raising his brows significantly, replied with a tinge of irony:

"Before this throne and in the presence of these noble gentlemen, my message is but to deliver to you, gracious lady, the good wishes and greetings which my exalted master charged me to bear. But my mission is too serious and important to be discharged at this public gathering and can only be discussed in the council chamber of your responsible minister. I shall await in my own quarters for your Highness to inform me when the negotiations can be opened."

Whereupon, begging to be excused, he took his departure, leaving the whole assembly in a state of complete bewilderment. Busleyden leant towards the Chancellor and whispered:

"I believe I know those eyes and that voice. I fear we shall have a hard struggle."

In an ante-room of the inner court at the foot of the four-storeyed Belfry, and in the fortified gate-house, Oliver's Scottish Archers and armed retainers were waiting, and when he rejoined them they gathered round him and concealed him so successfully, that on the way to his quarters, it was almost impossible for any of the inquisitive folk in the streets to catch a glimpse of the French ambassador.

At noon of the same day, when, thanks to Daniel Bart and one or two intelligent Flemings among his retainers, Necker had already learnt all he wanted to know regarding the critical political situation, and had been given the names of the more prominent party leaders and demagogues, a small deputation from the ruling corporation led by the second magistrate, presented themselves before him and with elaborate ceremony invited the King's representative to the Town Hall, where the magistrates were assembled. Daniel, who received them, informed them that his master could not see them and, addressing them in formal French, with all the haughtiness naturally affected by a man of rank towards boors, added that the ambassador must first have audience with my Lady of Burgundy and the municipal council of the city of Ghent. He was probably at that very moment due to present himself before the Princess, but as soon as he had an opportunity he would inform the magistrate when he could receive his spokesman. The deputation withdrew, much depressed and filled with the worst forebodings.

But Jehan Coppenhelle, the tanner, who was now President of the Guilds and leader of the Independent Party, and, though old, was as garrulous and passionate a radical as he had been in the days when the wicked town extorted its privileges from the young Duke, grinned contentedly into the raised collar of his cloak as he left the ambassador's house just after dusk. He had not been long inside, nor had he been allowed to have audience with Necker, but had been received by the stalwart lieutenant, who, with a significant smile, made a sign to him, and gave him to understand in fairly fluent Flemish that he might be of good cheer, and count upon French support. He was to make all the necessary preparations and return that night to the ambassador's quarters, after taking every possible pre-

caution that his visit should not compromise the Count of Meulan. But this Chevalier de la Barbe, who was apparently very short-tempered, did not seem to understand details or the giving of definite information, nay, he appeared to have so little time to spare that he unexpectedly cut short the old gentleman's outburst of eloquence with such a genuine Flemish curse that Coppenhelle was amazed by the foreign diplomat's knowledge of colloquial idiom, and was only too glad to hold his tongue.

That evening one of the Chancellor's secretaries invited the royal ambassador to go to the Château des Comtes. Once again the twenty Scottish Archers accompanied him, and distributed themselves about the castle, from the gate-house to the ante-room of the Council Chamber, in which the young Duchess, the Chancellor and Busleyden were awaiting Necker. Maria, who looked paler than she had done earlier in the day, betrayed by the uneasiness of her glance and the quick movements of her head the excitement with which the unaccustomed proximity of serious political business, personified in the strange and self-possessed ambassador, had filled her. The Chancellor, a thoughtful man of about Oliver's age, was standing beside her, and scrutinised Oliver as he entered with cold gravity. Busleyden remained in the shade behind, the better to observe the Count of Meulan, who, calm and unconcerned, took up his position in the bright circle of light.

"Most gracious lady," the ambassador began in clear matter-of-fact tones, "you must know, and you also, my lords, that your situation and that of Burgundy is alarming and that it is incumbent upon you to decide whether to incline to the east or to the west. My exalted master, the King, who is ready to waive his recognised rights as suzerain lord of the Duchy, and would fain avoid any dramatic rattling of the sword, has authorised me to offer you the support of his strong arm. Does your Highness wish to accept his protection?"

The Princess was silent, and looked at the Chancellor. Humbercourt smiled shrewdly.

"His Most Christian Majesty is not accustomed to offer his help without laying down conditions," he said cautiously. "Pray state what his conditions are, Count."

"You misunderstand the position," the ambassador replied coldly. "My exalted master is not in the habit of claiming what

he already holds in his hand. It is not a question of this province or of that, and least of all of an ultimatum. It is not even a matter of passing importance, which the King would fain arrange as he pleases. It is a matter of the future of both realms, which, if you so desire, can, peacefully and advantageously to both Houses be united into one realm, one great European power."

"How can this be accomplished?" enquired Maria.

"His Majesty offers you the Crown of both kingdoms through a marriage between yourself and the Dauphin, your Highness; and until his son is ready to be married, he is prepared to guarantee your independence as Duchess of Burgundy, and the inviolability of your territories."

Stricken dumb with surprise for the moment, the Princess at last gave vent to a low discreet laugh.

"We want a man, Messire, not a child!" Humbercourt interposed bluntly. "Perhaps you will allow us to express the King's idea in slightly different terms. It is the aim of the House of Valois to lay hands in the easiest and cheapest way on the heritage of the prince whose grave it dug. Does His Majesty imagine that now Duke Charles is dead, there are no eyes to see and no brains to think left in Burgundy?"

The Count of Meulan made a gesture of protest implying that the audience was at an end.

"Enough, my lord, let us drop the matter," he said calmly. "I must confess that this rebuff causes neither me nor my exalted master any surprise." Then raising his voice, and looking from the Chancellor to the Princess he added: "But do you, gracious lady, and you too, my lords, know what it means for the fate of Europe, if the House of Hapsburg becomes the heir instead of the House of Valois?"

"Who has mentioned the House of Hapsburg?" the minister rejoined evasively. "Why do you suppose that we cannot —?"

"Stop, Humbercourt," Maria interrupted in clear tones. "As the Count has come to negotiate on behalf of the Dauphin, his peaceful mission deserves to be met with a candid avowal of our reasons for rejecting it. You are not mistaken Messire," she added, turning to the ambassador; "our late lamented father, shortly before his death, promised our hand in marriage

to the son of the Roman Emperor, and we have confirmed our acceptance of the suit both in writing and by exchange of rings. Pray acquaint the King of this point. Pray tell him also that despite our reverence for his exalted person, we cannot for reasons of piety agree to the proposal and could not do so even if we were free and the Dauphin were not a child."

The Chancellor bit his lip. The ambassador bowed and smiled.

"I thank your Highness for your candid reply. But allow me to add, most gracious lady, that candour is the smallest of the political virtues. 'Twere better for you to leave the transaction of affairs of state to your experienced Chancellor, and shrewd Heer van Busleyden over there, who ever since noon has been trying to recapitulate his experiences in Péronne."

Busleyden accompanied him out, and led him to a recess in the ante-room.

"I am not mistaken then, *Sieur le Mauvais*," he whispered. "We are old acquaintances who are under certain obligations to each other. Possibly also I am not mistaken in supposing that your presence here is not altogether accounted for by the audience you have just had. Remember, I brought the Duke to the King in Péronne!"

Oliver made a grimace.

"And I helped to make you Grand Chamberlain to the Duke," he retorted scoffingly. "Shall we continue thus to flourish our obligations in each other's face, my lord? But I like you. Go on questioning me."

Looking cautiously round, Busleyden whispered:

"Was the King really hoping that the Princess would marry the Dauphin?"

"No," Necker replied laconically, with an inscrutable expression on his face. The courtier blinked.

"Will the King push forward now, *Sieur le Mauvais*?"

"To answer that would be high treason, Heer van Busleyden."

"But what if I were to tell you," the Grand Chamberlain proceeded, his face flushed with excitement, "that owing to my interest in your person, I have been enquiring into your antecedents, and through the first magistrate of this town, who was also at Péronne, have gained some valuable information?"

Anywhere else you might not mind having these facts referred to; but here within the walls of Ghent, you might find them rather painful. Do you think you could now give me more precise information, Master Oliver Necker?"

Oliver looked him straight in the face and, slowly parting his lips so as to reveal his teeth, smiled maliciously.

"Oh, certainly! Heer van Busleyden," he said emphatically, "in that case I would confess that twelve hours ago it would have been a good thing for the Duchess and her Court to leave here post-haste. But I am afraid it is too late now."

He left Busleyden rooted in astonishment to the spot where he stood, and in a moment was hurrying away under the protection of six Scottish Archers.

"I was not mistaken," Busleyden informed the Chancellor a little while later, "he is the Ghentish Devil to whom the Valois has sold his soul. I fear the worst, Humbercourt."

In spite of the lateness of the hour, he despatched a guard to Pieter Heuriblocq, the first magistrate, asking him to come immediately.

It was at about this time that Jehan Coppenhelle slipped into the French ambassador's quarters. The broad-shouldered lieutenant received him, and took him to his master. Coppenhelle found a thin grey-haired man, already dressed for a journey, who looked at him with a strange expression, and astonished him by addressing him though more cautiously than his underling had done, in the same pure Ghentish idiom as the foul-mouthed Chevalier de la Barbe had used only a few hours previously. The conversation did not last long, for the ambassador immediately came to the point by urging Coppenhelle to rebellion.

"Make your preparations this very night, Master Jehan. The King wishes Ghent and Flanders to be independent. His troops are ready waiting at Ronsse and will protect you if you are attacked from the direction of Brussels. Strike to-morrow, before the Court leaves the town. Keep the Princess, showing her all due deference, in your power, and separate her from the Chancellor and Busleyden, who are the only dangerous brains you have against you. And avoid any unnecessary bloodshed, Coppenhelle."

The latter raised his eyebrows.

"You speak Ghentish just as well as I do, your lordship," he said with a furtive smile, "and yet you pretend not to know the people of Ghent. They have the Devil in their veins, and cannot rebel like sheep."

The ambassador frowned.

"If a hair of the Princess's head is harmed, sir," he said gravely, "the town will lose its royal patron, and the Grand Master's protection. And if the people of Ghent have the Devil in their veins, perhaps they will not mind obeying him." So saying he tore the false beard from his face. "Don't you know me, Jehan? I have not aged very much more than you have!"

Coppenhelle started back in amazement, and put his hands to his head.

"Necker!" he cried. Daniel Bart laid his great hand on the old man's mouth.

Just before dawn, escorted by insurgents who had cleared the municipal guard from the streets, the King's ambassador with his suite passed out of the Bruges Gate and left the town which was already in the hands of the radicals. Towards morning the Town Provost with a few hundred Burgundian troops and officials of the law arrived before the ambassador's deserted quarters, in order to arrest Oliver Necker, citizen and municipal councillor of Ghent, on a charge of high treason and of having illicitly taken office under a foreign power. But instead of the object of their search, they found a body of armed radicals. As the Provost approached them to demand an explanation, shots were fired, and a number of soldiers were killed. This was the signal for the outbreak of the rebellion. From the adjoining streets, hundreds of well-armed members of the Independent Party poured forth, and surrounded the small body of troops. At the same moment the gates of the town fell into the hands of the revolutionaries. The Town Hall and the Château des Comtes were occupied. The magistrates, with nearly all the known members of the pro-Burgundian Party, the Chancellor and the Grand Chamberlain were arrested. Towards noon, Jehan Copenhelle was master of the town, and proclaimed the independence of Ghent and appointed a revolutionary government. The same day, Pieter Heuriblocq, together with the second magistrate and one or two municipal councillors, was executed.

Twenty-four hours later the two Burgundian ministers were conveyed to scaffolds on the *Marché du Vendredi*, which still bore traces of the previous executions. Once more the townsfolk yelled with excitement. An attorney read out the charge against them and the sentence passed by the tribunal of magistrates — the two statesmen, as representatives of the ducal power, had violated the privileges of Ghent, and according to the laws and statutes of the town, any one who infringed its privileges was punishable with death. Suddenly there was a stir among the assembled multitude. The Duchess in a black gown and veil — still shaken by the struggle she had had with the stubborn magistrates on behalf of her two ministers, when she had pleaded, warned, threatened, and shed tears, all in vain — rushed out of the Town Hall on the market-place. She was alone, and, pressing a small handkerchief to her mouth with one hand, she waved the other desperately and beseechingly over her head. The crowd made way for her in almost reverent silence. In a moment she had reached the two members of the tribunal who were standing a short distance away from the two bloody shambles, and seizing the nearest by the shoulder, she shook him and clung round his neck.

“Have mercy! Have mercy!” she cried. “Give me back my friends!”

The man looked in helpless confusion at her hair, which had fallen loose from beneath her veil, and shrugged his shoulders. Releasing him, she rushed to the others, one after another, and at last turned to the wall of spectators waving both her arms wildly and crying:

“Have mercy! Mercy!”

A sullen silence reigned. Humbercourt on one scaffold, and Busleyden on the other, as if inspired by the same thought at the same moment, tried to remove the bandages from their eyes with their manacled hands. One or two voices in the crowd cried, “Mercy! Mercy!” and the cry was soon echoed by a score, by a hundred others.

Joos van Eecke, the new Town Provost, a son of the former President of the Guilds, grew very red, and, clenching his fists, roared out to the executioners above the swelling uproar of the mob pleading for mercy:

“Get it over!”

The two heads fell almost at the same instant. Two women shrieked and again the crowd took up the cry.

Necker had gone to Thielt. He had been grave and taciturn on the journey, and strangely melancholy. Nor did he often raise his eyes to look at the familiar landscape.

"Your love of home seems to have cooled, Master," said Daniel Bart, with well-meaning banter, "and yet you ought to be pleased with Ghent now."

Oliver waved a hand listlessly, but did not answer. He did not wish to acknowledge how deeply disappointed he was with the town and how much he hated its quickly kindled malice. He did not care to admit that the last shred of joy, the last taste of human happiness, which he imagined to be his, had been crushed under the weight of his political duties. He had faced the whole proceeding in a spirit of indifference, and had worked as a stranger, as he always did when on diplomatic missions for the King. Not once had he allowed thoughts of home to stir his emotions. Was it his fault. Was it Ghent's fault? He longed to be back in the stony solitude of Plessis, among the dear animals. And he had only forced himself to visit Thielt in order to rob his heart of an opportunity for simple human joy.

On entering the village, he found it unchanged — the little brick church, the pointed roofs of the houses, the clean, well-kept farms, eloquently testifying to the comfortable circumstances of their owners, and here and there a new barn, a new linen-weaver's shed. Necker, looking gravely to left and right, shook his head.

"I feel a stranger," he said to Daniel: "don't let us stop."

The magnificent procession created a great stir. Men, women and innumerable children crowded round it. Oliver examined the throng uneasily and with unfriendly eyes. The clerk of the parish hurried up to the strangers, and asked them to explain whence they came and whither they were going.

"Trot!" Necker commanded, by way of answer. The crowd scattered before him muttering curses. The cavalcade left Thielt in a south-westerly direction, by the Roeselare road, along which, some thousand yards from the village, the Neckers' farm was situated. At the gate of the farm there stood a pretty red-haired girl of about fifteen, with large grey inquisitive eyes.

"Halt!" cried Necker to his men, and sprang from the saddle. The girl ran back to the farm-house. Necker was about to follow her when a great tawny dog with a deafening bark made an angry rush at him, tugging at its chain and barring the way. Oliver retreated to the gate with a bitter smile on his lips, and called out to the girl:

"Give me a glass of milk, little Mistress Necker — Louisa, Anne, or whatever your name is!"

The girl, taken aback, stood still and looked round; then she smiled, showing a fine set of teeth.

"Yes, my name is Anne Necker," she cried in a clear voice, which rose above the noise of the barking. A tall, thin, and slightly bent old man, came out of the farm-house, his wizened face alert with suspicion. He shot a quick glance through the gate and seeing the armed men, cried out:

"Willum! Jasper! Quickly! Close the gate!"

Two stable hands rushed out of a shed close by, and banged the heavy gate to with a crash. Oliver bit his lip. He heard the great beams being thrust across the opening to the accompaniment of the old man's curses, and a sound of blows. The girl was crying. Then he heard an old woman's voice — it was Eliza's — saying:

"What's the matter Henryk? Leave the child alone, do!"

Oliver shook himself as though he were cold, and knocked at the gate with the pommel of his sword. The grille was drawn back and the head of the angry old man appeared.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Oliver stepped back a pace. His elder brother's likeness to his father, Claes, was so striking that it pierced the years like a flash of lightning, and shed a vivid light on that night of suicide. "I drove him to his death," thought Oliver, deeply moved. "How can I expect anything good from Fate?"

"What is it you want, sir," Henryk repeated. Another head now appeared beside the old man's — it was that of a wrinkled white-haired old woman. Eliza looked at the stranger with dim frightened eyes.

"I was asking for a glass of milk," said Oliver gently. The old woman began to blink, and in her effort to look at him she frowned.

"Two hundred yards from here, dear sir, you will find

a dairy," said the old man indifferently. "I have no milk to give you."

Oliver looked at Eliza, nodded and turned away.

"Thank you, brother Henryk," he said over his shoulder, and sprang into the saddle. And the cavalcade rode quickly away.

"Oh, Oliver!" muttered Eliza, putting a hand to her head. Henryk closed the grille in silence and shrugged his shoulders.

At the Grand Master's headquarters, which were still in the neighbourhood of Tournai, Necker heard of all that had happened in Ghent after his departure — the execution of the old magistrate, the two ministers, and of Maria's heroic intervention. Oliver clasped his hands and bowed his head.

"Your fellow countrymen are devils, *Sieur le Mauvais*," said Dammartin, compressing his lips and looking askance at Oliver.

"They are beasts!" said Oliver passionately, stamping his foot. The Grand Master gazed at him in astonishment. "No, Count," added Necker, after a short pause, and in a voice which, though softer, was more full of bitterness, "no, I will not insult animals! You are right, they are devils!"

"Did not the rebels act in accordance with your instructions?" Dammartin enquired maliciously. Oliver had the explanation on the tip of his tongue, but he merely cast a glance of defiance at the speaker and answered shortly, "Yes."

He returned to Plessis by a series of forced marches.

"Mary, Mother of God, Master!" groaned Daniel Bart at the end of ten hours' ride, "one would almost think the people of Ghent were on our heels."

"Ghent lies behind me," said Oliver softly. "Life lies behind me — and before me. . . ."

Daniel did not understand the last words, but he felt the melancholy underlying them and grew sad.

"To the devil with this life!" he muttered. Oliver looked at him and smiled faintly.

"To whom do you say that, Daniel?" he enquired.

When he saw the King again, Oliver, despite the shortness of his absence, noticed for the first time how terribly he had aged — the threatening veins on his sunken temples and on his withered hands, and his eyes in which already lurked the shadow

of eternal night. He found the King with his animals. Louis was feeding the singing birds with hemp seed, the owls with finely minced raw meat, the cranes and starlings with corn and apple chips. Oliver bowed lovingly over the old hands. Louis raised his head and kissed him.

"I am glad to see you here, brother," he said tenderly. "When I am alone life is too much for me." He looked into Necker's eyes. "So you have seen your home again, Oliver. Did it make you happy?"

Necker shook his head.

"This is my home, Sire," he said, pointing to the animals, and stroking the dog Tristan. A beautiful blue-grey demoiselle, with bright red eyes and horn-coloured bill, stepped with dignity out of the cage and came to inspect Oliver's hands.

"My Fils-de-Putain is not a bad successor to poor Larron, is he?" the King observed, stroking the bird's black neck.

Chapter 2

THE GREAT ENEMY

THE STONE WALLS of Plessis, surrounded by the terrified looks of the people, pressed ever more heavily upon the realm. Jean de Beaune, the only member of the King's immediate circle whose office brought him constantly in touch with the populace, was the first to hear, with his sharp ears, that the groans of the country were turning to curses. He was clever enough not to inform the King, but he told Necker, who listened to him with grave attention.

"Whom are they cursing?" he enquired at last, "the King or me?"

"The devil-King, and the King's Devil," Beaune replied, laughing at his own formula, "both, Necker. They no longer draw any distinction between the two. And Tristan and I follow at a respectful distance. The tension is becoming alarming."

Oliver allowed the matter to drop, as if he were not interested. Nevertheless it was then that for the first time he gave his sanction to Daniel Bart's brutal behaviour as steward of his estates and domains in the Seine valley, and told him always to represent himself as acting in the name of *Sieur le Mauvais*, and not to attempt any settlement of the various disputes with the City of Paris, but, on the contrary, to do everything he could to provoke them. The innumerable complaints that were received by the Parliament and urgently forwarded to Plessis from injured burghers, offended officials, people unjustifiably arrested, husbands of run-away wives and fathers of dishonoured maidens, Oliver used to return with ironical marginal notes and his own signature affixed to the royal seal, of which he was the Keeper.

It was about this time that Jean de Beaune was wounded in the chin and had his horse shot under him in a Norman village. Again he thought it advisable to inform Necker of the truth, and to tell the King that he had been hurt in a riding accident. But on this occasion Necker seemed at attach extraordinary importance

to the occurrence and insisted on the King being told. As the Treasurer could not prevail upon himself to do so, Oliver undertook the task. Louis went white with rage and ordered the male population of the village to be decimated and the whole district to pay an unusually heavy fine. The good-natured Jean begged the King on his knees to temper justice with mercy, and not to burden his conscience with such a signal piece of inhumanity. But Louis looked coldly at him and shook his head.

"Your conscience has reached the age of sixty in my service," he said, "and I feel certain it will be able to bear the burden."

The Treasurer rose and said to Oliver:

"I seem to remember, Necker, that you used to display a certain humanity. Are you not going to put in a word for the people who will be made so miserable through me?"

Necker shrugged his shoulders.

"It was I who suggested to His Majesty the punishment that would fit the crime," he replied indifferently. When the King left them to go and feed his animals, Jean de Beaune continued excitedly:

"Are you aware, Necker, of the crass political stupidity of irritating the people unnecessarily in this way? Surely they are sufficiently exasperated as it is?"

"No, I am not aware of it," said Oliver calmly, showing him the orders. "From the purely formal standpoint can you see any difference in this document from the old form of royal edict?"

The Treasurer, to his astonishment, saw that, contrary to the traditional procedure, the document was made out in the name of the King, but was signed not by Louis but by le Mauvais. He raised his head and looked at Necker.

"If I understand the matter aright, Master," he said slowly, "you are trying to draw the curses upon yourself. You wish to stand in front of him and shield him. Shall I never be able wholly to grasp your greatness, Necker?"

He seized Oliver's hand.

"My God, Jean," said Oliver, deeply moved, "let us cut sentiment out. Yes, the problem is how to prevent the King from becoming unpopular, or something worse. When you brought me to the Court I was useful because I was never heard. Now times

are different; now I can be useful if I create a stir. Owing to the reputation which I now have in any case in the realm, not much courage or greatness, or much art either, is required to draw the whole of the people's ill will upon myself. You must help me in this."

"And when the King dies?" Jean asked after a pause. Oliver smiled.

"You know Beaune, that those are words which must not be uttered within these walls. The King will not die."

The name of the Evil One resounded through the length and breadth of the land. The loathing of the people, who did not dare to attack the sacred person of the King — the Great King in spite of all — now at last had its objective. The Devil ruled not only the land but also its King. The people began to pity the King and to pray for him. The pious spirit of the age tried to understand Louis' apparent sacrifice — the surrender of his salvation to the Antichrist, for the sake of his political triumphs. His people wished to help him and save him. Two courageous men — the parliamentary President, Le Boulanger, and the Archbishop of Paris, filled with shame by the number of crimes committed by Necker's lieutenant in the outskirts of the capital that had remained unpunished, and full of anxiety regarding the moral position of the King, came to Plessis to complain and to warn their sovereign. At the audience, which they obtained with great difficulty, Necker was present. After a few minutes of embarrassed silence, the President said:

"In the interests of the ecclesiastical and mundane dignities which we represent, we beg your Majesty graciously to grant us the privilege of addressing our entreaties to you alone."

Louis frowned and answered sharply:

"We see no one present whose ears may not hear what we hear."

"Sire," replied the worthies, "we see *Sieur le Mauvais*."

The King half closed his eyes and raising his eyebrows gave a smile full of malice.

"Then you behold our representative, to whom we propose to leave the further conduct of the interview," he replied. So saying, he rose to his feet and went to the door. "Look to your dignities, gentlemen," he said over his shoulder. "*Messire Le Mauvais* is authorised to tell you that they are in danger."

He left the room. Necker addressed them courteously:

"I may tell you, President, that it is not only within the last hour that His Majesty has been desirous of urging upon you the personal administration of your estates, and he therefore proposes to relieve you of your official duties. As for you, Monsignor, all I can say is that apart from certain troubles connected with his sight and liberty of movement, Cardinal Balue is getting on very nicely in Amboise. I am now at your disposal."

"We have no further business here," declared Le Boulanger, whose face had grown very pale.

WHEN one morning Tristan l'Hermite, who was nearly ninety years old, was found lying dead in bed with a peaceful smile on his face, his weary heart having probably failed in his sleep, the King felt the first recurrence of the mortal fear with which he had been troubled for some time. He shuddered and cowered silently in his chair when he heard the news which Oliver told him in measured but unequivocal terms, and his chin quivered. Once again he refused to look upon death.

"Sire," said Necker reproachfully, "ninety years of faithful service surely deserve a glance of farewell."

"Yes, yes," muttered Louis, as he waved a hand uneasily, "but is his face fit to be seen? His life was so full of difficult tasks that it may have made his death a difficult and horrible one. . . ."

Oliver, greatly moved, shook his head.

"There is such a thing as faithful service, Sire," he said with emotion, "which either extinguishes conscience or takes its place. Tristan's face is beautiful, and is so full of peace that it can give comfort even to the living. Come, Sire!"

The King rose slowly and timidly to his feet, and supported himself on Oliver's arm.

"Do you wish to make us familiar with death, brother?" he asked, trying to smile. "Do you wish me to be lulled to sleep by it? I know death well enough. I know it well enough. And no mask will make it alluring to me!"

They went to Tristan's bedroom. The closed shutters kept out the light; but the room was illumined by one or two candles. The royal chaplain was praying beside the corpse. The old man's

face, which only yesterday had been wreathed in ironic smiles, now seemed to have abandoned all earthly standards; it was strangely smooth and sleek in his last rest. It seemed younger too, or at least more capable of lasting than his living countenance had been, fixed for all eternity in an expression of scoffing content. And each feature was so firm in its unalterable calm that the movements of life and animated expression were not even missed. It was like a marble bust carved by a master hand. A silk cloth tied about his chin and cheeks and lightly knotted over his sparse locks held the jaws together.

Jean de Beaune, who was standing at the head of the bed, and gazing with deep emotion on the body, wished to withdraw when the King entered. But Louis made a clumsy sign to him to remain, and with his eyes on the floor, took up a position behind the Treasurer's broad back, as if it were a shield. Laying his hands on Jean's shoulders, and raising his head with a jerk, he looked over at the dead body. At a whispered word from Necker, the chaplain stopped praying and left the room. The King gazed intently and in silence on Tristan's white parchment features, and slowly stretched his head forward over Jean's shoulder.

"Good — good . . ." he muttered as if to himself. He was almost touching Beaune's ear with his lips. "How much older is Tristan than I?" he asked with bated breath. The Treasurer did not dare to look at him.

"A good twenty years, Sire," he answered gently.

"Twenty years . . ." Louis repeated, and turned to Necker; "that is a long time, isn't it, Oliver?"

"It is a long time, Sire," said the Master turning away. The King made a grimace as though he were in pain.

"Do you give them to me, Oliver?"

Necker did not answer and pretended not to have heard. The King breathed more loudly and quickly.

"Does this dead figure comfort you, Oliver?" he asked, "and why?"

"His peace comforts, Sire."

"Why? Why?" the King insisted in great excitement.

Oliver turned a grave face towards him.

"Because it might cure some poor man of his fear of death, Sire; because this is the sort of death one would like to die."

The King remained silent for a while, his lips compressed and his fingers grasping Jean's shoulders so tightly that the latter hunched his back in pain.

"No — no —" Louis now muttered and then more loudly: "No — no, death will not catch me in this way! You will not catch me in this way!"

He cast a quick glance round the room and suddenly releasing his hold of the Treasurer, hurried to the window and threw open the shutters. A merciless ray of sunlight flooded the room. Louis, his face distorted, strode up to the death-bed.

"Sire," cried Jean de Beaune, drawing back. Oliver laid a hand on his arm and whispered sadly:

"Let him be, Jean! That is his form of self-defence."

With an evil expression Louis gazed on the corpse which seemed to be suffering in the crude light. It looked as if it were going to melt piteously away like a wax image which the destructive hand of time was threatening. The dead face seemed to change from yellow to grey, and to those standing by, it looked as if it were undergoing a process of ghastly decomposition. Oliver kept a firm hold on Beaune who was on the point of dashing forward, as Louis, with an expression of repugnance, bent quickly over Tristan and slipped the silk cloth from his head. The mouth fell open as if in a sudden terrible return to life, and out of the toothless hollow shone a pallid tongue. And, as if to add to the ghastliness of the spectacle, an uncanny growth of hair had covered the cheeks, upper lips and chin with silvery stubble. The dead man's expression seemed like a mute cry. The King groaned with horror, his body shook as if with the ague. Raising his hands he drew up the lids from the lifeless eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Then shrinking back, he cried out with his fingers spread: "There, there, Oliver, that is death!" and rushed out of the room.

Necker found him among his animals, once more at peace, calling them by their pet names in a gentle voice, and with an owl on his lap, which was so blinded by the sun that it hid its head under his doublet. He did not look at Oliver, and only said in an embarrassed voice:

"So I have torn the mask away. But He still remains the enemy. You know it now, Oliver. Do not make any more attempts to reconcile me to Him!"

He was silent once more and busied himself with his animals; then, after a while, he enquired:

"Who will be Provost General now?"

Necker hesitated a moment and then replied:

"I, Sire."

The King looked at him in astonishment. Then he smiled and said: "Yes, brother, very well. People fear you, but they find you inaccessible."

EVEN Necker was never able to discover with certainty whether Louis realised the deep importance of his assumption of this accursed office and of its effect on the kingdom and its attitude towards the two men who ruled it. The King knew full well that it was only Tristan's hoary age and his personal honesty which had prevented the angry passions of the people from breaking out into open rebellion or murderous rage, and that it would not be possible, owing to the traditional methods of government, for a new Provost General, even by a milder exercise of his judicial power, to lighten his inheritance of hatred. But he already seemed too far removed from the stirring events of the present, too indifferent towards the emotions of humanity whom he despised, too deeply trustful of Necker's genius, to fear any personal disadvantages from the appointment, or to grasp the ultimate meaning of Necker's readiness to accept it. He was content to create a post to be filled by an acting Provost Marshal, who would carry out the sentences on behalf of his chief, and he did so less because he feared Oliver needed protection than because he himself shrank from spending hours and days without his company.

Necker's power at this time was, even in its external manifestations, quite astonishing. He was the guiding spirit in all foreign, political and administrative business, the Keeper of the Great Seal, and the highest judicial official in the realm. After Tristan's death and the last vain attempt to inspire the King with resignation towards his earthly lot, Necker worked with such calm and consistent energy towards the achievement of his ultimate aim that the ever watchful and intelligent Jean de Beaune alone was aware of the heroic nature of his activities. The many important schemes for the advancement of learning which were carried out, not from any humanitarian motives,

but from a deep sense of statesmanlike responsibility, and all the manifestos of political and administrative triumph, bore the King's name, whilst all proclamations and orders which revealed unparalleled tyranny were signed "le Mauvais." The popularity of the Valois and the admiration of his greatness, which had been petrified by the fears created by the stone walls of Plessis, experienced a new lease of life, in which there was no little love and compassion. The King alone, who had never troubled to distinguish between the forced utterances of subordinates and the truth, and whose misanthropy led him to repel any affectionate advances which reached him from the outside world, had no knowledge of the changes that were taking place among his people. But neither had he been aware of the danger with which anger and fear had for a certain period threatened the existence of the state.

Whereas Necker, in spite of all his hardness, was himself guilty of no breach of the law in his public activities as statesman and Provost General, he shielded with ever increasing provocativeness the growing impudence and aggression, often bordering on criminality, of his lieutenant, Daniel Bart. After the unsuccessful intervention of the parliamentary President and the Archbishop at Plessis, an open breach occurred between the City of Paris and Bart, who lived at St. Cloud. The Archbishop, who from time immemorial had exercised the right of supreme, minor and ordinary jurisdiction in the neighbouring villages of the Seine, sent a parliamentary advocate to the lieutenant with an ultimatum demanding the liberation of innumerable prisoners who had been incarcerated at St. Cloud after unjustifiable judicial proceedings. Daniel listened to the lawyer without saying a word, then rising from his chair, he went slowly towards him as, white to the lips, he retreated to the wall. Seizing the weakling, he threw him out of the window into the courtyard below, where a few of his men were waiting to catch him, and they proceeded to lock him into cleverly constructed pillory irons. The advocate's two companions, who had witnessed the deed of violence, were driven with whips across the Seine into the Bois de Boulogne, then called La Forêt de Rouvray, most of which was Necker's property. On the following morning, the Archbishop presented himself in person before the Parliament and lodged a complaint against this monstrous

violation of right and personal liberty. He succeeded in having a legal order given for a hundred guards to march to St. Cloud with instructions to bring back the advocate in the condition in which they found him. To their surprise, the emissaries, who were armed to the teeth, found the unhappy man still on the same side of the river, about half-way on the road to Paris. He was standing still in his neck irons, unable to move, and the chain which hung from the pillory shackles had a heavy iron ball at the end of it, weighing three hundred pounds. With great difficulty the shackled man was lifted into a small-wheeled cart and conveyed to the city. The parliamentary council, which met in the Tournelle, and before whom the advocate was brought, ordered him to be freed from his chains, after an accurate description had been taken of his condition. But it transpired that neither the guards who had fetched him, nor the skilled locksmiths of the Conciergerie, could open the ingenious lock of his iron collar. There was no alternative but to beg the lieutenant in courteous terms for the key, and guarantee a safe conduct to the messenger who brought it. After quickly obtaining permission from Necker, Daniel Bart had the inconceivable effrontery to go himself to the Parliament House, and with a great display of pomp and chivalry, to unlock the collar and set the half-crippled advocate free. While all this was going on, the President was conferring in an adjoining room with the Archbishop, who had hurried on the scene, and the judges of the criminal court, regarding the possibility of retaliating by cunning or violence against Necker's lieutenant for his impudent challenge, and availing themselves of the unexpected opportunity, which they could hardly hope would recur, of taking possession of his hated person by fair means or foul, and ignoring the promised safe conduct for the sake of the public weal. In spite of repeated warnings from a few of the more cautious councillors, who, in thinking over the situation, thought the day of reckoning had not yet arrived, and saw in the whole affair merely a provocative act on the part of the Devil behind the Throne, the resolution to arrest Bart was carried by the irate President and supported by the Archbishop. Daniel Bart, who was in no great hurry to leave the Parliament House, found the gate closed, and was stopped by the officer of the guard, who asked him in no polite language whether he was Daniel Bart. Necker's lieutenant

haughtily replied "Yes," and did not even trouble to affect surprise. The officer thereupon produced a warrant, which looked as though it had been written a few moments before, though it was considerably pre-dated, and declared that he had orders to arrest the lieutenant on account of eighteen fresh charges which had been brought against him for robbery, extortion, rape, wrongful imprisonment, embezzlement of church property, overstepping the bounds of his authority, and illegal exercise of jurisdiction. Bart laughed aloud and turned to one of his companions.

"Ride to Plessis, Grand Jean, and inform the Provost Marshal how these gentlemen have broken their word. The poor President!" he added, with a compassionate shake of his head. And offering no resistance, he allowed himself to be conducted to the Conciergerie. His messenger was of course arrested at the gates of the city, but he had time to fire a shot from his arquebus, which was the sign informing his confederates, who were waiting in the Forest, of the arrest of the lieutenant, and bidding them bear the news to Necker, as arranged. A day and a half later, while the Parliament in secret session was still discussing the pros and cons of bringing the lieutenant to trial without the sanction of the supreme judicial authority, but could not summon up the courage to subject Bart to examination by torture, an express courier arrived from Plessis with the royal order couched in the most brutal terms and signed by the Provost Marshal to the effect that the lieutenant was to be set free immediately, the prosecution was to be suppressed, and the men who had been arrested were to be compensated by a payment of 10,000 dollars levied on the City of Paris, while the parliamentary President was to be deposed from office, the bench of criminal judges was to be re-elected, and two hostages were to be sent to St. Cloud by both the Archbishop and the Parliament.

THE time had come when the King's aloofness from ordinary life had grown into a total lack of interest in everything except his own existence, which was now bounded by his animals, his books and his dark and threatening thoughts about his own destiny. He had become almost completely indifferent to his kingly calling. The Evil One at his side ruled in his name, and he was quite content to allow him to bear the brunt of all the

unpleasant business of state and of the unceasing buffets of humanity. He was only too pleased for Necker to shield him from a contact which nauseated him and to consult him only on important political questions, which stood on a loftier plane than petty private concerns, and enabled him to treat nations like pawns in a game, and time as a slave. But even his consultations with Necker regarding decisions of importance grew more and more rare; and, when his lieutenant in Picardy was defeated in Artois by Maria's Hapsburg husband, he showed neither agitation nor disappointment, but merely armed himself afresh and reopened negotiations with Ghent. And once again time was on his side and strengthened his position of hard and unsympathetic triumph — Maria died before the issue was decided. Ghent rebelled once more against the foreign Duke, kept his children as hostages, and negotiated for the marriage of the infant Margaretta with the Dauphin in Touraine. At last peace was concluded and Artois, together with all the Walloon provinces of Burgundy, was added to France. Louis' political position was now consolidated, and the great kingdom, as well as all Europe, stood spellbound in superstitious awe before the almighty power of the invisible King. The old puppet King René had died and, according to the literal interpretation of his will, had left Provence, Anjou and Maine to the Valois. Flanders was in his suzerainty, Brittany was peaceful and obeyed his will like a well-trained dog and the whole kingdom trembled at a word from the fortress of Plessis. Switzerland rendered obeisance like a French province, Spain, all the Italian powers, Portugal, Navarre and Scotland, begged for Louis' friendship, while Edward of England, who was mortally ill, and Hapsburg, were glad to keep quiet, and were thankful if they were left in peace. The old man of Plessis had no more to worry about except his own life and his beloved animals.

But the animals made life easier for him than he did himself with his old body and brain, his decrepit organs and limbs. And he no longer denied it. The menace was renewed every night that he did not drink heavily. It came from within. He could not escape from it or control it. It oozed from every thought as from a leaking vessel. It throbbed in his blood, gnawed at his nerves, caught him in the neck, roared in his ears, rattled in his head, and clutched him in the breast. And so he drank. The time

came when the menace harassed him by day, driving the blood to his brow and flushing his face so that the ground seemed to open before his feet, the walls to bend fantastically, and the world itself to be enveloped in a flimsy veil of red. Then suddenly the past itself was shut out. Nothing about him, not even the animals, had a name. His brain remembered nothing and was empty, spinning round like a cart-wheel lifted into the air; and his feet and hands seemed to be clothed in a clammy coat of clay. What was he to do? What could he do? Far better face the night, terrible though it was, far better exorcise its spectres with a sober and active mind, waiting in the library among the unchanging calm of his books for the relief that dawn would bring! With his customary energy, he suddenly made his life an exercise in extreme abstemiousness. He drank nothing and ate little, worked at night on a new code of law, and was satisfied with a short sleep in the morning. The hours of daylight he spent in his zoological garden, trying to gain energy by being near his animals. But never, even on days when he was visibly weaker, did he complain to any man, not even to Necker, who dared not show any sympathy and avoided even a glance of compassion.

Spring came round and burgeoning and budding nature threw the picture of old age into ever more terrible relief. It also made the King irritable and sensitive, plainly pointing to the imminence of the catastrophe. Oliver noticed with alarm how hard and knotted were the veins in his temples, and how in the daytime in the course of conversation a look of indescribable horror would frequently enter his eyes, and his features would be distorted with restless dread. It was at this time that Oliver made a will in favour of young Anne Necker, Henryk's youngest daughter, as he had since learnt she was. As he was in no doubt as to his own ultimate fate, and wished to save part of his fortune for the child, he deposited a large sum of money, which he was able to realise, together with his final instructions for its disposal, in a bank in Bruges.

On an unusually warm day in April, the King seemed to be filled with unaccountable good cheer. He was more talkative than usual, as he walked with Oliver across the meadow where the horses grazed, but his remarks were quite incoherent. Suddenly a Berber stallion close to him reared, and galloping past him, almost kicked him with his hoofs, giving him an unexpected

shock. His face distorted, he ran away unsteadily and dragged Necker with him out of the meadow.

"That was St. Pol!" he panted. "He almost kicked me with his hoofs, Oliver. . . . Am I not secure even here? . . . Or is he. . . ."

He pressed his hand to his heart and babbled incomprehensibly.

"Calm yourself, Sire," Oliver implored, looking anxiously at him. Purple in the face, Louis raised his arms wildly.

"He ought to be shot," he cried. "I was in a good mood. I was able to sleep, my feeling of heaviness had gone. He knew it, he, the rebel, the Constable. . . . Why are you looking at me like that?"

Without saying a word, Necker took his arm and tried to lead him to the castle. But the King's legs refused to bear him. Letting him slip gently on to the grass, Oliver supported his head and opened his collar.

"What has happened? . . . What has happened?" Louis stammered, closing his eyes and clinging about Oliver's neck. The Master tore up some grass still wet with dew, and laid it on his brow and breast. Louis breathed more easily.

"People must not see me lying here," he said in clearer tones. "I will not have it! Lift me up. I am all right. I insist!"

Oliver raised him to his feet. The King walked with some difficulty for a few paces, leaning on Oliver's arm. Then pulling himself up and clenching his teeth, he let go. By the time they had reached the castle, the last signs of weakness had vanished. The guards recognised the short, quick steps of their King and his impassive countenance, which looked at no one, and he appeared just as he had done an hour previously.

Louis went to the library and, dropping exhausted into a chair, looked at Necker with more hostility in his eyes than they had ever shown before. Oliver noticed it and bowed his head in order not to annoy him by the expression on his face.

"Any news of Edward's condition?" he asked in a hoarse voice. Oliver hesitated before replying. Louis thumped the arms of his chair.

"Do you imagine," he asked angrily, "that it would do me any harm to hear that he is dead? We have been expecting it for weeks."

"He is dead," replied Oliver. The King thrust out his chin and frowned.

"How old was he?" he asked after a while.

"As old as I am now," Necker rejoined cautiously, "which seems to me astonishing for a cripple like him."

With a peevish gesture, Louis waved away the remark and observed him intently.

"How much younger are you than I am, Oliver?"

"About ten years, Sire," Oliver replied gently.

The King shouted at him:

"Go to the devil! Fourteen years! How you spare me! I insist on knowing what you think of my condition."

"I only think," Oliver replied, shrugging his shoulders, "that it is ridiculous for you to be angry with me like this simply because I happen to witness your little attacks of weakness, Sire."

Louis' face relaxed and he stretched out his hands to Oliver.

"Yes, help me, brother," he muttered. "You don't believe, do you, that He was standing behind me a moment ago, that He was only at arm's length behind me? You must not believe it."

He stopped and then, as if he were gasping out his last confession, he continued:

"I am already involved in the struggle with death, Oliver, and have been for some time. . . ."

He drew Oliver closer to him and, speaking in faltering, helpless accents, he said:

"Are fourteen years a long time for Him?"

Deeply moved, Oliver raised his head and looked into the King's sad eyes.

"No, Sire, and I shall not desert you. If needs must, I shall anticipate my fourteen years. But you must not lose heart, and you must not shut yourself off from me. How can I help you if you do?"

The King nodded slowly.

"I cannot resign myself," he said. Then suddenly changing the subject, he asked: "Is Edward's brother, Gloucester, keeping quiet, or is he aiming at the throne?"

Oliver felt it would be unwise to irritate him by either silence or prevarication, and thought he was probably strong enough now to hear of the tragedy that had overtaken others

without receiving too severe a shock by the omnipresence of death. He answered quickly in a matter-of-fact voice:

"At the present moment Gloucester is called King Richard. Edward's two little sons died by his hand. He has declared Edward's two daughters to be bastards, and offered them his friendship, Sire."

With alarming suddenness Louis' pale cheeks flushed a deep red and his eyes seemed to be starting out of his head with the rush of blood.

"For such villains, death is too good," he groaned, "for they are murderers! But there are Gloucesters everywhere. . . . Anyone can be a Gloucester. . . . I was a Gloucester once, brother. . . . To me He will come, too. . . . For heaven's sake help me!"

Almost choked with horror, he looked round the room, babbling incoherently. Oliver took him to bed.

That night the dog Tristan howled and scratched at the door of the King's room. For the last year — that is to say, ever since he had been working at night to escape his terror — Necker had not been allowed to sleep in his room, and on this particular night he wished to avoid frightening the invalid by any change in the ordinary routine. He therefore left the room as soon as Louis had sunk into an uneasy sleep. But he remained awake in his own apartment, too much upset by the struggle he had had to be able even to read a book. Staring into the dark recesses of the room and examining himself to discover whether his heart beat in unison with the fate of his changing spirit, he was conscious of feeling tired and of being more resigned than his resistance to the cantankerous old man seemed to warrant. He shook his head sadly.

As the dog was now giving short howls of pain, he sprang up and, pressing his fists against his beating temples, dashed out of the room. As he entered the ante-chamber, the dog left the door of Louis' bedroom with a whine and came and fawned at his feet. Then he heard the sound of a heavy fall inside the room, followed by uneasy breathing. He flung open the door. Some way from the dais on which the bed stood, the King was lying stretched out on his side with the breath rattling in his throat. In an instant the dog was by his side, licking his ear and his white locks. Necker knelt down beside him. He pushed the dog aside;

she snarled, and he gently raised the King. Louis had fallen on the side which had been affected by his stroke. It looked as if, awakened by the terror of his menaced body, he had flung himself from the bed and that the last cry of his open mouth had been for the faithful animal or the faithful servant. The enemy must have caught him and struck him down between the bed and the door. His face, the left side of which, with its drooping lid, its flabby cheek and the distorted corner of the mouth, bore the mark of the heavy fist that had struck it, was purple. His right eye was wide open and bulging, and its staring pupil was fixed in the agony of the stroke. Was it necessary for him to die in this terrible way, thought Oliver, overcome with emotion; and lifting him with an effort, he carried him back to the bed. The limbs on the left side of the body hung limp and vertical like those of a loosely-jointed doll.

But the King did not die. After that terrible night, through which Oliver struggled against the deadly apoplexy by means of blood-letting, cold compresses and vinegar dressings, and during which he had not dared to summon any help except that of Jean de Beaune and a confidential servant who knew how to hold his tongue, the sick man fell into a deep sleep. Meanwhile the Archbishop of Vienne had been conducted with the utmost secrecy to the castle. He was one of the most illustrious physicians of the day, and before Oliver's accession to power had been the King's confessor. He was obliged to recognise that Louis was not only paralysed in the left side, but had also lost the power of speech. The learned prelate hoped there might be a general improvement within a few days. Obviously irritated by Necker's presence, however, he did not wait the given interval, but left the same evening, after he had approved the Master's methods of treatment and had given his solemn word to be silent concerning the King's illness.

But for the three who had been initiated, no one in the castle knew of the King's condition. The inmates were accustomed to his moods, and knew from their experience of Amboise that he often retired from public view for days at a time. His animals alone missed him and squalled, barked and neighed for their friend.

When Louis awoke he was extraordinarily quick to recover from his horror at himself. It was true that with his sound eye

he looked at Necker with an expression of strange reproach, and opening his mouth, and clenching and spreading out the fingers of his right hand, struck the bed clothes desperately. But nothing except a hideous snorting sound passed his lips, and one side of his face was distorted with indescribable rage. But this fruitless exhibition of indignation lasted only a short time. When Oliver showed him the desk and writing materials, he eagerly stretched out a hand to them, and in almost illegible script wrote:

"I can see, hear and recognise — I shall soon be able to speak!"

Oliver looked at him with a smile full of wistfulness and admiration.

"Verily, Sire, you are still strong enough," he said in all sincerity, "even to spare some strength for me."

Louis waved his hand approvingly and broke the heavy quill in his fingers. One side of his face was distorted in an effort to smile. Then, with one eyebrow raised, he scratched with the broken half of the pen, the heartless words which were to constitute his first order to the castle staff:

"The King is slightly indisposed. Anyone breathing a word of this to the outside world will be hanged."

The Provost Marshal read out the order in the castle courtyard before the assembled officials, guards and servants, stopping all leave and establishing a strict censorship of letters for the duration of the illness. By a second edict the King commanded his servants not to fail to attend to his animals as long as he was unable to do so himself. They would answer with their heads for their welfare. The stone walls of Plessis trembled beneath the sick King's wrath.

Twenty-four hours later Louis began to speak. At first it was an almost incomprehensible jargon, but as with a supreme effort of will he repeated his sentences, attacking each word separately and not letting it go until he could pronounce his sentence with ever greater clarity, by nightfall he had regained his speech. His voice, it is true, had changed. It was no longer as sonorous or manly as it had been, but seemed broken, as it were, as if the speaker had great trouble and difficulty in making his words follow one another. But his joy inspired him with a strangely heroic and unyielding confidence. Deeply moved and

overcome by the sight of such courage, Oliver watched the struggle. The King, putting a different interpretation on his attentive gaze, stretched out his hand and said:

"Friend, I thank you."

"Why do you thank me, Sire?" Necker enquired in surprise and deep distress. Louis timidly stroked his arm.

"I know, I know," he said in his broken voice, "you have given me back my speech, brother. Great, great is your magic. . . ."

"Sire," Oliver interrupted in dismay, "God gave you back your speech!"

"Great is thy magic, brother," the King insisted unflinchingly; "but give me back my whole body as well. Look, is this kingly?"

With his sound right hand he lifted his left arm and let it fall back like the limb of a doll. Necker murmured in anguish:

"Pray to God, Sire. I can give back nothing."

"Is this kingly?" Louis continued to ask, cruelly deaf to what Oliver had said, and he laid his hand on the paralysed half of his face. In consternation Necker dropped on his knees before the King's couch and clasped his legs.

"Sire, Sire," he cried, "I pray you, give up this terrible faith in me. I am but a man!"

"No, no, no!" groaned Louis, and his crooked mouth quivered with fear. "I will not give it up. I cannot give it up. It has helped me before—it will help me again. . . ."

Oliver did not dare to contradict him again. To avoid exposing the King to fresh danger, he was obliged to be silent. Slowly he raised himself to his feet.

"Stay here, stay here," Louis murmured, stretching out his fingers towards him. "I think my left leg almost felt your body."

Necker, his head reeling, remained on his knees beside him, rubbing and pommelling the dead muscles. Towards midnight the King was able with an effort to move his paralysed limbs, and he fell asleep with a sigh of content. Oliver, who watched beside him, buried his burning brow in his hands. Why does Fate torment this old man in this terrible way with me and with himself? he asked. Is there no end to it? But on the following day he changed his attitude towards the invalid, treat-

ing him as he wished to be treated, with the suggestive mastery of one who had triumphed over the body. With the matter-of-fact firmness of a spiritual healer, he lifted him out of the bed and stood him on his legs.

"You can stand now, Sire," he said, and let go his hold. Louis stood up.

"You can move your left arm now, Sire." Louis raised it a little.

"You can walk a little now, Sire," he repeated, seizing the King's arm. Louis limped along sideways through the room. But for the weakness of the muscles of the left half of the face, and his left eye, which remained closed, the signs of paralysis had all disappeared by evening. He walked with difficulty, his body bent like that of a dotard, looking as if he were about to fall forward, and he never let go of his stick. He was more than ever shy of men, fearing lest a glance would betray to them how changed he was. Before he left the castle for the first time, to go to his animals, he issued an order that all officials and servants were to keep out of the way. Thus he met only the cold blue eyes of his Scottish Archers, who were neither inquisitive nor capable of being shocked. And so he returned to the friendly greetings of his animals.

Towards the beginning of May, on one of those silent evenings when the sick King was visited by fresh feelings of distress in his body, his terrified eyes rose over the tops of the folios he was reading in search of Necker. The sweet fragrance of burgeoning plants was overpowering and the song of the nightingales in the hedgerows too shrill, as it pierced into the solemn austerity of the library; and, as Oliver rose silently to close the window, Louis expressed an extraordinary desire.

"Friend," he begged with some embarrassment, "read me the chapter from the prophet Isaiah in which King Hezekiah, who is sick unto death, implores the Lord to lengthen his days, and the word of the Lord was given to Isaiah, and the Lord of Life added fifteen years of health to the King's days."

Without revealing his astonishment, Necker turned the leaves of the Bible and read the 38th Chapter of the Book of Isaiah. He had hardly read a couple of verses before the King, shaking his head anxiously, interrupted him and asked hopelessly:

"How can I say that I have walked before the Lord in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which was good in his sight? How can I say that, brother?"

Oliver did not even raise his head, as though he was not in the least surprised by Louis' extraordinary pre-occupation with the Bible story.

"Your doubt may in itself be sufficient unto the Lord," he said simply, and went on reading.

The King gazed intently at him, his hanging lid quivering with secret agitation. Necker concluded: "Hezekiah also had said, 'What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the Lord?'"

"I prayed when I was dumb," Louis muttered hastily as if in reply, and, as had become a habit with him since his stroke, he covered the left side of his face with the palm of his hand and continued gently: "But I always feel, brother, that through God you are urging me to resignation."

Oliver, with an imperceptible smile, gave him a glance of pity. Then, turning over the pages of the parchment Vulgate, he he went on reading:

"'For the grave cannot praise Thee, death cannot celebrate Thee, they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth. The living, he shall praise Thee, as I do this day.'"

Both were silent for a while. Louis with his sound eye scrutinised him sharply.

"Yes," he said at last, "you wish to be released, brother! I can understand it. And even if I do little more that is good in order to please God, and even if God, like ourselves, knows that the royal conscience can be burdened with little more, and is ready to take the greater part upon itself, still a good deed might yet be to some purpose, brother, to you and to me."

"Try it, Sire," said Necker. The King spoke without hesitation, like one who had long since thought the matter out.

"Cardinal Balue is pardoned. Pray ask the Holy Father, in my name, for a papal brief absolving me from the sin of his incarceration. Then go to Amboise and throw open the cage. Will the good deed be placed to our credit, brother?"

"I think so," said Oliver, and bowed gratefully over Louis' hand.

ROME had made repeated efforts every two or three years to have the Cardinal liberated. Owing to the good political relations between Louis and the Holy See, and in view of Balue's known treachery and the King's powerful position in Europe, the papal representations had always been polite and obsequious. But they had been consistently met with that dangerous and seductive dialectic which ignored what it did not wish to grant. The Pope was, therefore, all the more delighted to fall in with the King's suggestion, and his brief was a letter of gratitude.

Balue's body had grown so heavy that his legs would no longer bear him. After ten years of desperate activity as a translator and exegetist, his mind was still active, although his eyes had grown dim. But as he had reached the pinnacle of earthly contemplation, he was no longer terrified by the length of his earthly darkness. For the last four years he had lain a shapeless mass on his plank bed, his hands folded across his ample belly, his eyes generally closed, dictating to an Augustinian friar, who sat outside the cage, a new version of the Canon and a commentary on the Apocrypha.

On one of those days in May, when the sun-warmed fragrant air was pouring in through an open window in the vaulting and flooding his prison, the quiet worker was disturbed at an unwonted hour. The door was flung open and not bolted again, while men's footsteps drew near.

"What has happened?" Balue enquired a little testily, turning his head. Nobody answered him, but close beside him he heard the strange and unexpected grating of files.

"Fra Benedetto, what is happening?" he enquired, in great excitement of his secretary.

"The men are working at the iron bars, your Eminence," the monk replied, in a voice to which astonishment gave a curious ring.

The Cardinal laid his head resignedly back on his pillow, closed his eyes, and in a clear voice began the *Benedic anima mea Dominum*. The files grated louder and louder, and the bars fell rattling down. A strange footstep broke upon the solitude which for fourteen years the prisoner in the cage had endured, and a man stood quite close to him and spoke to him without any bars between.

"Monsignor Jean Balue, Cardinal Bishop of Angers, your Supreme Eminence, by the grace of His Most Christian Majesty you are a free man and have leave to go to Rome."

For a moment Balue was speechless as if he were still listening to the words, nor did he open his eyes. At last he murmured:

"Who is the bearer of this great news, that I may bless him."

"A servant of His Majesty," murmured Necker, and dropped on his knees.

Chapter 3

THE CONQUEROR

GOD did not appear to have noticed the good deed. On a scorching day in June He sent the King his second stroke. Almost without a sound Louis collapsed in the chair in which he happened to be sitting, and Necker softly and silently locked the door of the library and went to sit by the unconscious man, holding his cold, moist hands in his. He did nothing else. He merely held his hands and, with the tips of his fingers, felt the galloping but gradually slackening pulse, kept his eyes on the purple face which slowly became paler, and waited. Louis had closed his eyes. He grew paler and paler. His heart beat ever more slowly, and the upper part of his body gradually toppled forward. At last, with a slight, almost childish groan, he let himself fall into Oliver's arms and let his head sink on to his breast. Oliver made no attempt to turn it sideways or to lift it so that the King might breathe freely. Then, as if they were being gently pushed, the King's thighs, knees and legs slipped from the seat. Necker grasped the sinking body more tightly and lifted it on to his lap.

He must have sat for fully two hours with his human load, which grew heavier and heavier as it seemed to leave life behind, and at last he could trace no sign either of breath or of heart beat. But he was not anxious or sad, or moved by the fate of his own or of this other body. He was not even busied with his thoughts, as he contemplated the wasted face beneath his own. One thing alone he knew — this was not yet death. Then, in a unique moment of sensitiveness, he felt that the King's heart, so close to his own steady and sound heart, was gradually recovering. "He cannot die," he groaned, and for the first time in his life he contemplated suicide.

The King regained consciousness in a state of such extreme bodily and mental exhaustion that it was impossible to determine the extent of the paralysis the second stroke had caused. And yet he seemed to have felt the proximity of Necker's body,

and to miss it when the latter at last carried him to the couch which stood ready in the library. The Master quickly heard and understood the barely perceptible signs of displeasure and discomfort that Louis displayed, until he once more raised him from his pillows and supported him on his own body. And thus, leaning once more on Necker's breast, he soon fell into a heavy, deathlike sleep. From his experience of the first attack, the Master knew that for the moment the danger was over. On the following day, although Louis was certainly weaker, there was no sign of paralysis of either body or mind. He seemed to have survived this second stroke without any evil consequences. On this and the following two days Louis said and moved but little, and was probably still under the spell of the great physical shock he had received. And yet Oliver, who was constantly with him, knew that his mind was already working again and seeking new weapons against the enemy. He also feared that the King's disappointment in God would probably manifest itself in a violent renunciation of all human humility and an increased ferocity of hatred, mistrust and contempt.

He was not mistaken. As soon as Louis was better, he surprised both Oliver and the Court by the uncanny thoroughness of his new measures for defence and protection. In the first place he proceeded to sift the civil inmates of the castle and to reduce the number of officials and servants to a minimum. He spent several days in making a personal examination of the staff, and without the smallest consideration dismissed anybody who for the most trivial reason — because he had either a suspicious cousin or an unfortunate name — had provoked his displeasure. Those who remained did so subject to the rules he laid down for their coming and going, his "*panta rei*," as with a sly twist of his mouth he described it to Necker. These people were quartered outside the castle, and had to relieve each other of their duties in accordance with a carefully arranged programme which made any dangerous familiarity with affairs and events inside the castle impossible. Thus Louis arranged that, except for himself, Necker and Jean de Beaune, only the four hundred Scottish Archers should occupy the castle. No guest, no foreign ambassador, not even members of the royal house, were allowed to spend the night in Plessis, or to stay a moment longer in the castle than they were informed they might before they had even

arrived. All round the fortress and for some distance beyond the outermost walls, a network of strong iron piles was built, so that the whole castle bore a terrible resemblance on a large scale to the cages the King had designed for the incarceration of distinguished prisoners. At each of the four corners of this monstrous cage, four armoured towers on wheels were erected — crested larks, as they were called — each of which was garrisoned by forty sharpshooters, who had orders to shoot without challenge anyone approaching the network of iron piles by night, and during the hours of admission made a personal search of all who presented themselves, whether they were princes or merely tradesmen delivering goods. The walls behind the iron piles were protected by spikes and *chevaux de frise*, while the no man's land between was used as a dry moat, covered overhead and patrolled day and night by guards.

Oliver did not trouble to waste words over this senseless display of zeal. Only once did he ask the King, apparently with no intention of scoffing:

“Are you afraid of being besieged, Sire?”

Louis turned his crooked face to him:

“I am being besieged,” he replied with reproachful gravity. “And I wish people to know that I will make it worth their while to besiege me.”

THE King's need to prove to himself and to the world that he still existed increased as his health declined. He was now so weak that he could no longer leave the library, and only allowed himself to be carried in a chair to his animals. But for Necker, the Treasurer, and one or two of his bodyguard, scarcely another soul passed before his troubled eyes. Yet he now broke the habit of a whole lifetime and clad his impoverished limbs in the most splendid clothes, long, fur-lined mantles, which spread out majestically about his wizened form. He also began once more to take a personal interest in the business of government and even in the trivial details of administration, and addressed the world in terms which grew more truculent the greater difficulty his tired mouth found in pronouncing them. And now, for the first time, he met with opposition from Necker.

Oliver made no attempt to oppose the old man's yearning for activity or his outbreaks of spite and petty tyranny in

which, according to his strength at the moment, he either tormented or merely irritated his subjects — cancelling or reducing their pensions, depriving them of offices and dignities and inflicting all manner of arbitrary and terrifying punishments upon them. But in all this Necker refused to allow the King's name to be so hideously desecrated. He insisted that all such disciplinary measures should be signed by him, as had been the practice during the last few years. But the King seemed suddenly to have fallen victim to a hitherto unsuspected jealousy, and firmly insisted on personally drawing up and signing every decree, whether political or administrative. Oliver might have allowed fate, which he considered was already definitely settled, quietly to take its course. But in his alarm at the manner and energy of Louis' bodily resistance, it struck him that the difference of opinion between himself and the King provided the obvious means of forcing Louis away from him — so far, indeed, that he might give way before death came and thus end the tragedy of such a life. For he was very tired.

For these reasons he remained firm and intractable, and displayed a harshness out of all proportion to the matter in dispute, and serving only to give offence. Louis sat shrivelled and huddled together, a bloodless, dry-boned old man, in an arm-chair which was much too big for him. Putting his hand to the left side of his face, he looked up at Necker with a strange expression.

"Are you, too," he said slowly, "going to confirm the terrible suspicion which has been haunting me for weeks — that people no longer respect the King because he is old — and perhaps ill?"

Oliver made a hasty movement.

"If you cannot exclude me from such suspicions, Sire," he said sharply, "then more things are in danger than the mere work which I imagined I had done in your service."

But Louis remained calm and only blinked his sound eye.

"Do you mean my life or my throne, Oliver?" he asked with a melancholy irony which at once surprised and moved Necker. "And do you imagine I am so ill that I can no longer hear or understand your changed tone? Do you imagine, Oliver, that I hear your menace as — a menace?"

Necker remained silent where he stood, and not a muscle

of his face moved. He did not even raise his eyes, but his heart beat fast. He suddenly realised the significance of the conversation, and yet could make no guess at what would be said. And he became confused as he used to be in the early days of their joint life together, when he had been unable to gauge the extent of Louis' demoniacal share in his soul. That this half man should still wish to dispose of knowledge and power which he had already lost or, perhaps, never possessed, would possibly result in his humiliation, and prolong to all eternity that terrible fight he had had with him and against him. He suppressed a groan.

"Poor brother," said the King softly, and there was a ring of strange pity in his hoarse voice. "We are more brothers than is good for you. For me it is good, for I alone benefit by it. I live on it. And I am also free from your doubts, your fears, your secret weariness. So you see, Oliver, I know most of the things which torment you. But how can I allow that side to prevail?" Louis let his hand drop from his face and raised his head. He seemed to be watching the words leave his mouth as he slowly uttered them. "I believe we are two in one, Oliver, and I believe in the power of your life in me and about me. Perhaps it had to be that I, who am cruel, should be most cruel of all to you, my poor brother."

Necker was silent and did not stir. He did not lift his eyes from the coloured mosaic of the floor, neither did any muscle of his face move. He seemed to be quite deaf.

"Oh, Oliver," Louis continued, not heeding that he was stiff as marble, and speaking almost reproachfully. "It is not a question of my exalted name or your hated one at the foot of this or that document; it is not a question of the sacrifice of your person, which has already been sacrificed to me! It is not even a question of your own life which you now wish to destroy, but of the life of the King, which is mine and yours as well!"

Necker was silent. Louis once more laid his hand against his face and huddled himself up.

"And now answer me this, brother," he murmured wearily, "are you bearing about with you a thought which I perhaps bore in my brain before you did, for I got it from you — are you meditating suicide that I may or may not be forewarned about, so that I may die?"

Oliver did not raise his head, but merely pressed his hand to his brow and temples. He did not move a step nearer.

"I cannot go on any longer," he groaned as though shaken by an inner force, his despair bursting from his breast like a storm. "I cannot go on any longer, Sire; so leave me to my death."

"No," said the King harshly, clenching the fingers of his hand against his face. "No, there is no such thing as a death for you alone."

"Then die with me!" Necker cried, his eyes riveted to the floor. "Have we not travelled far enough and are we not old enough?"

"The King may not die," said Louis sternly, and then he added hastily: "And now you are thinking of death, brother."

Oliver opened his eyes, but he was unable to raise his head. "What would it matter to me?" he panted.

"Why do you not do it, brother?"

At last Necker's knees gave way and he fell forwards, his head in his hands, on to the tessellated floor. For a moment the King did not move.

"Poor brother," he said at last. "Now I love you. I must make another attempt with God. . . . Perhaps what I did was too little. Perhaps He will help after all. . . ."

DURING the scorching weeks of July, when the body like a brittle vessel loses a drop of life each day and the spirit imagines that by will it can make them good, the King, besieged and oppressed, planned a strange sortie against death. He remained the shrewd strategist he had been all his life, preferring others to fight his battles for him. When hard pressed, his counter attacks were rarely carried out by his own arms, the most he did was to use the persuasive power of his eloquence or his purse. And thus, by the devious ways he loved, he prevailed on others to attack the besieger from behind. Now that he was endeavouring to obtain Necker's ultimate release, he was forced to leave everything to the grace of God, who was fighting for him, and would, as it were, surprise the enemy in the rear and overcome him. His brain, which already had to struggle against long spells of vacuity and darkness, worked out during the few cool and pleasant nights the great plan of how to bribe the Almighty.

The help of Jean de Beaune was enlisted to carry the plan into action.

From the stone walls of Plessis a shower of gold was scattered over the churches and monasteries of Europe. All the cathedrals and abbeys of the kingdom received sacrificial offerings and presents of jewels, gold and territory. Reliquaries and their shrines, golden chalices, church vessels and monstrances studded with precious stones, the famous silver grating of St. Martin of Tours, which weighed four thousand pounds, and the precious casket of the holy St. Eutropius of Xanten, were distributed among the important churches outside France—the Church of the Three Kings in Cologne, the Church of Our Beloved Lady of Aix, the Church of St. Servatius of Utrecht, the Church of St. Bernadino of Aquila, the Church of St. Maria Novella of Florence, and the Church of San Giovanni in Laterano in Rome. To the Church of St. Bavon in Ghent was sent a precious crucifix consisting of a golden cross with the Saviour carved in a single piece of ivory. Before the Bishop of Tours set off at Louis' command to deliver this treasure in Flanders, the King showed it to Necker, who during the last few days had been attending to his duties with silent reserve.

"I have not forgotten Ghent," observed the King, with the obvious intention of giving him pleasure.

"Perhaps the clergy of Ghent will prove more grateful than its burghers," Oliver replied indifferently. "I do not know."

Somewhat displeased by this reply, Louis hesitated to tell him his secret intention; but as Necker was about to leave the room and was already in the doorway, he observed:

"If you like, Oliver, it can go to Ghent in your name. Perhaps . . ."

"Sire," the Master interrupted indignantly, "that would be blasphemy, blatant blasphemy. I, at least, must remain out of the affair."

Jean de Beaune was having sleepless nights. Louis' efforts to propitiate Heaven had cost almost a million francs, excluding the value of the territories he had given away. The Treasurer was too shrewd to subject the oppressed people to the torment of a new tax, for, knowing the condition of the King, he feared that if a fresh wave of bitterness were to pass over the land, the

people would rebel and the kingdom fall to pieces, before the grave had closed over Louis' head.

"If only I knew how long this madness was going to last!" he said, turning to Oliver. "How long is he going to live?"

Oliver shrugged his shoulders. Jean de Beaune looked at him and shook his head.

"I only hope for your sake, Necker, that he will last a bit longer," he said sadly. "As you know, your position at the present moment is so precarious that his death must bring you into immediate danger. But possibly, Master," he continued soothingly, when he saw Oliver's ill humour, "I have some inkling of your attitude towards these ultimate issues, and I shall take good care not to give you any advice. But just let me tell you this — I have heard that the Parliament has started secret proceedings against you and Bart, and is collecting material and witnesses and is better informed concerning the King's condition than any of us imagined. It is only waiting for the end to strike this blow at you. Try to forestall their scheme while you still have the power, or secure yourself by taking distinguished hostages — Le Boulanger, for instance. His popularity has increased since he was deposed from office. You might put him in the oubliettes."

Oliver waved a hand impatiently.

"Has the economic situation been brought to a state of alarming chaos through the recent expenditure, Jean?"

"I have had to encroach on the reserves because ready money is short."

Necker pondered a moment.

"We must not impose a new tax," he said at last. "I grant you that, even if I care little about what happens later. But we can try to cover this extraordinary expenditure by some other means. I shall instruct Bart to give you the proceeds of this year from my salt and wood monopolies. This will meet at least a third of the deficit. Then I shall issue decrees of dispossession against ex-President Le Boulanger, and a few other rich parliamentarians." He smiled wearily. "What do I care about a little unpopularity, more or less?"

Jean de Beaune bowed his head, but said nothing.

"And, after all, Jean," Oliver continued animatedly, "you are at liberty to go to the King and dissuade him from making

fresh sacrifices to the churches. For very good reasons I cannot arrest his mania myself."

But Louis would not be persuaded. When his Treasurer informed him in intentionally plain and brutal terms that it was madness to enrich the already wealthy churches and surfeited deans of cathedrals at the cost of the people whose blood had been sucked dry, his only reply was a crooked smile.

"I might answer, my friend," he said craftily, "that no expense can be too great for the salvation of the King. But I am not unreasonable, and I can tell you that the expenses are over now and the returns may be expected. I dare say we may even get interest as well."

And thus he began to reap his strange harvest. He refused to regard Rome's lavish assurance of gratitude as empty formulæ. To Oliver's surprise he granted an audience to the Legate who brought the Pope's blessing, although weakness had already spread over his face like a death mask, and his muttered words were barely comprehensible. Deeply moved, the prelate gazed on the feeble old man and listened with his ear close to his mouth. But no words of humility did he hear, no request for the last rites, no readiness to die, but strange wishes amounting almost to royal commands addressed to God's representative, demanding all the assistance of his pontifical power in saving and prolonging his life, that all-important life which was in imminent danger.

". . . And to lengthen it," Louis repeated passionately, forcing the words out with difficulty, short of breath as he was.

The kindly Pope, who was a shrewd statesman, complied with the sick man's wishes, for he thought his pains might be rewarded. He sent to him at Plessis the corporal or vest in which St. Peter had sung mass, and several other relics, which Louis required for his prayers. He also gave orders that the sacred ampulla of Rheims, which contained the coronation oil, and was never moved from its place, should be conveyed to the royal invalid. He also granted the most extraordinary of the King's wishes and summoned all the saints, brothers and blessed anchorites, the wonder workers, the great and holy men of prayer, the helpers and healers, and sent them one by one, pledging them to silence regarding their mission, and bidding

them go to Plessis to act as intermediaries between God and Louis. More than this, for very good reasons, he did not tell them.

Towards the end of the summer the extraordinary procession of saints began. At Tours they were received by the Bishop, who always kept them apart and sent them at intervals one by one each day to Plessis. And yet none of these godly men remained more than an hour or two in the castle. They were munificently rewarded and conducted to Orleans, whence they were allowed to return home. Not one of them, whether he were German, Italian, Spanish, or French, whether he were a theologian, a hermit or a cloistered monk, whether he were ardent, indifferent, straightforward or pharisaical, ever forgot the moments during which he had stood before the piteous remains of the great King, with his harassed half face, and heard that voice which sounded as if it had been stamped upon. Louis asked them all the same question with the greatest possible economy of voice and words:

“Father, can God lengthen my life through you?”

And from them all he heard the same reply, from frightened, kind or unfeeling lips:

“Sire, this power I do not possess.”

“Father, why say you do not possess it, when God could give it to you at any moment?”

But all he heard in reply was protests, promises, embarrassed chatter, honest compassion, and gentle or stern exhortations to resist no longer, but resign himself to the will of the Almighty. These men of God, whether eloquent, halting, daring or timid, never knew whether the King was affected or moved by their words. They knew not whether he even heard them, or was merely unresponsive or already unconscious. He cowered down in his arm-chair, his face, one side of which he kept constantly covered with his right hand, immersed in shadow. A small leather belt under his arms was fastened to the back of the chair and held him up, so that the upper part of his body should not fall forward in a moment of weakness. These men of God never knew whether his sound eye, which was certainly turned towards them, really saw them and observed them or saw through them as through a void which already filled his sockets as though he were blind. And when they had said all

they had to say, which some did quickly and some more slowly, and all had grown either discouraged or frightened, they would see the finger of his hand move in admonition and heard him repeat the same formula:

"Father, kiss me with the mouth of God, and bless my breath."

With his hand against his face, Louis pressed his head a little backwards so as to allow his grey lips to open. The mouths of the saints, faded or full-lipped mouths, the coarse mouth of the peasant and the small mouth of the scholar, met his with a pious kiss, and when they had received it the King's lips gasped to each in turn:

"Breathe on me!" And he inhaled the stranger's breath, which was but seldom fresh and more often foul, as is usually the case with sick and hungry old men.

The men of God, about twenty in all, came and went. Louis bid none of them stay. He never mentioned them, even to Necker, who never saw any of them. He was also silent concerning the success or failure of their miraculous powers and his own satisfaction or disappointment. But when a few days elapsed without any more presenting themselves he looked at Oliver strangely and asked:

"Is no one else coming, Oliver? I found no Isaiah, my poor brother, and not even anyone as wonderful as Robert of Tarentum of whom the Holy Father spoke so highly. Has he not reached France yet?"

Necker looked at him, heard his eager words and again felt a shudder convulse his frame — a shudder at what? At himself. There had been days, particularly those on which he had not been on duty with the King, when Louis seemed to be dying as though he were petrifying from outside inwards. But there were also occasions like the present — he always called Necker poor brother at such moments — when the King's vampire soul pierced into his body, and sucked a few drops of life out of him; and, though what he obtained was little enough, it put new life into his body. "Oh, how tired I am!" Oliver groaned within himself, and his eyes were not free from bitterness and a certain mild resentment.

"Oh, brother," Louis whined softly, as if offended by the reproach he felt, "I have not yet lost faith in the power of God.

Just see what efforts I am making and how anxiously I am awaiting the great Robert of Tarentum."

"He arrived at Tours three days ago," said Necker significantly.

"Then why does he not come here?" the King demanded sharply. Oliver hesitated before replying, but when he did so his words were free from any sign of mockery:

"Probably because he has heard that the Devil lives here."

The King was silent for a moment. Then with the corners of his mouth drooping, he said:

"He must be a queer sort of saint if he cannot summon up the simple courage of an exorcist!"

"Perhaps," Necker said with a smile, "he has a courage which none of the others displayed, and is afraid that if he drives out the Devil, he might do you and your wishes a bad service, Sire."

"Is that your latest form of joke, Oliver?" Louis enquired cheerfully. As Necker made no reply, he added with unexpected craft and assurance and with the cryptic irony characteristic of the days when he was feeling better, "Then the Devil should go to Tours and fetch the saint. This might lead to a strange rivalry in rendering me service. It might please me very much, brother."

ROBERT RIZZO, the son of an Apulian peasant, had been a hermit ever since he was twelve, and he was sixty-six when he received the Pope's request to go to Plessis. When the fierce and wrathful voice of his Maker had bidden him, while still a boy, to leave his father's sheep, his maize fields and olive groves, his dusty vines and his twisted mulberry trees, in fact to leave his narrow sunlit world and as a passionate and precocious youth, shut himself up in a rocky cave on the coast near Tarentum, the awe, veneration and worship of his godly neighbours had acted like bolts across the mouth of his retreat. Thus he never left it and, filled with ardent ambition for one object alone, he soon lost all desire to leave it. So he remained in the rocks, and reached adolescence, manhood and old age, a self-taught theologian of superhuman energy and single-mindedness. In the service of God he was as hard and ferocious towards himself as he was to other sinners, who came to him first from the villages, towns and

districts about his home, and afterwards from the rest of the kingdom. Finally pilgrims from the whole of the Catholic world flocked to his cave. No meat, fish, eggs, butter or milk ever passed his lips, which were thin as the edge of a knife. Only twice did he interrupt his fifty years of retreat, once to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and once to lay the foundation stone of two churches in north Africa. Gradually his influence extended to both Church and State, and although he refused all ecclesiastical dignities he had during his latter years been the soul of a strict orthodox party which at every conclave of Cardinals, and particularly among the Spanish faction — was held in great awe and respected by all the Popes. After vehement protests he had at last complied with the Holy Father's request that he should visit His Most Christian Majesty; but he did so only because he hoped through his influence over the Valois to restore the central power of Rome over the Gallic Church, which at that time had become very weak. His journey across Italy turned out to be a triumph for his holiness, which he had never expected. A papal legate and the Prince of Tarentum, the son of the King of Naples, went to fetch him. In Naples the King honoured him as a son honours a father, and walked barefoot to his modest inn to crave his blessing. In Rome, his arrival was the event of the year. The Cardinals flocked to the palace of the Pope's nephew, who was also Governor of the city, where the hermit had accepted a bare attic and a plank bed. Robert treated these mighty and magnificent personages with calculated frankness and the shrewd boorishness of the ascetic who stands beyond factions and courtly ceremonies. He captivated them with the contrast he presented — his great reputation and his mean and lowly intimacy with God. And although he turned his special privileges, as a person standing outside the hierarchy, a little too consciously to account, his personal success was unparalleled. During his three days' stay in Rome, the Pope granted him three audiences at which no one else was allowed to be present, each of which lasted three or four hours. Wise old Clement not only paid him the honour of giving him a seat at his side and commissioning him to found an order of Franciscan recluses, but also vouchsafed him precise details concerning the condition and private life of the King of France and the political and ecclesiastical advantages which might be won from Louis' disappointment

with the other men of God. One of these was the separation of Louis, who was sick unto death, from his infamous and demoniacal minister, le Mauvais, a man dangerous from both the spiritual and the worldly point of view, inasmuch as he had hitherto had the King entirely in his power and had not only tyrannised over France, but was the only man in a position to neutralise any attempt which might be made at this opportune juncture to gain influence over the person and policy of the King and of his successor, who was still an infant. The miracle worker realised that this mission was the crowning glory of his divinely blessed life.

His halt at Tours was merely an intentional manœuvre dictated by his primitive cunning for the object of raising the expectations of the King and adding to his own importance. The Bishop, who, like all the other prelates of the realm, was hostile to Necker, did not hesitate, when Robert cautiously questioned him, to allow his unfathomable hatred to depict the King's Devil in the worst possible colours. The picture of the favourite which his astute enquiries on the road had elicited was now complete in every detail. Robert, who loved bold contrasts, was convinced that he would not have much difficulty in laying hold of this creature, who could be none other than the Evil One himself, and with one or two blows of the divine cudgel cast him down from his pedestal.

Yet when the Bishop informed him that le Mauvais had arrived, and he heard the brazen march of two hundred Scottish Archers through the narrow streets, his cheeks turned pale.

"Do not provoke him, Father," whispered the Bishop, as he cautiously withdrew before it had been announced who it was that Necker had come to see. "Do not provoke him, because he cares devilish little for our cloth and our immunity, and Rome is far away, but the oubliettes are close at hand. . . . And Balue's cage is empty. . . ."

The miracle-monger buried his hands in the ample sleeves of his frock and crossed himself on the breast. The red rays of the setting sun shed such a radiance through the lofty windows that to the confused man, filled with unaccustomed feelings of fear and uncertainty, it seemed as if the Evil One himself were announcing his arrival in this hellish blaze, and as if at any moment he might spring in a flash of fire through the window. So

he stared fixedly into the red flood of light, too proud to appeal so soon to God for help, and so intent on preserving his equanimity that he did not see the grey-haired man enter at the further end of the darkening hall, and thus allowed him some moments in which to contemplate the bold outline of his hard profile against the red background.

"My Father!" said Necker gently from his shadowy corner. Robert started and quickly turned his head in the direction of the voice. But his eyes were so full of the red light that he could see nothing else. His quivering hands fell out of the ample sleeves, and with his right he seized the crucifix which hung in full view from the rosary. It reminded Oliver of the movement of a soldier snatching up his sword. The eyes in the austere head blinked, the white bushy eyebrows moved.

"*Chi è?*" he enquired roughly and suspiciously like a sentinel.

"Excuse me, Father," Oliver replied and advanced slowly towards him. Robert shielded his eyes from the light with his hand and looked at the gentle speaker, whose figure grew more distinct at every step. He was now before him in the light and bowing over his hand — a grey-haired man, of about his own age, possible younger, with the sort of face he liked, a face like his own, chiselled and chastened by a severe God, and with eyes full of the wisdom and melancholy which discomfited him even in the images of his Saviour and the blessed saints.

"Am I addressing the King's minister?" he asked in bad Latin, torn in two between secret attraction and righteous hatred. Then with an effort he called to mind the many forms Satan could take, and remembering his duty, he continued in illiterate Italian and his usual hoarse reproachful tones:

"You are *Sieur le Mauvais*, are you not?"

"Yes, Father," Oliver answered with a friendly smile. "I come to you in the name of the King, to beg you to go to him, and to accompany you if you accept his invitation."

"What does the great King want of a poor recluse like me?" Robert enquired, thus cautiously opening the struggle. Necker looked at him with calm gravity, as if he were laying aside his couched lance, and the old man blushed beneath his gaze.

"If you do not yet know it, my Father," Oliver replied, "you soon will. But we must have a few words together, you and I."

Robert, taken aback by such directness, threw back his shoulders and resolved to forestall the attack.

"Messire," he said sharply, "if I acknowledge my readiness to help His Majesty in matters of religion, it does not mean that I can be influenced by Court intrigue or by the interests of any particular party. Or is it spiritual matters we have to discuss?"

"Certainly, my Father," Necker replied emphatically. "For you know that in this country I am called the Devil."

The holy man almost sprang from his chair and threw out his arms to defend himself, as if he felt it were time to cry "*Apage!*"

"And am I to understand," he cried in threatening tones, "that this accursed nickname pleases you?"

"No," said Necker gently, "but you must try to wean the King from the pleasure it gives to him. You must try, Father, to save him from me, or to save him from what he sees in me, which perhaps I am."

Robert sank back into his chair, his eyes wide open as a child's with surprise.

"You say that to me, messire?" he murmured.

"The King is very ill," said Necker, suddenly feeling desperate at the helpless fluctuation of his words between truth and falsehood. "The King is consumed by a superstitious belief in the power of the Evil One, whom he sees in me and who perhaps I am. He is rooted far away from God and close to me. Save his life, my Father, for he wishes to live. It is a matter of his life, not of his soul; that is why he is summoning all of you. Save him through your divine command to separate himself from me. Father! Father!"

Falling on his knees, he clasped the legs of the hermit, who shook as though he had been struck with the palsy.

"*Apage! . . .*" he groaned, tortured by his love for the Evil One and striving hard to tear himself away from him. "The Lord will tell me what to do; *ma non mi toccare!* — *Apage Satana!*" he cried, roughly thrusting Necker away and raising the crucifix. But there were tears in his eyes.

THEY started off immediately, Necker in the van with the Scottish Guards, the saint in the rear, and reached Plessis towards midnight. There was still a light in the library. The King was huddled up in his great chair, with his strap still round him; his legs were covered with thick blankets, his eyes were closed and his head sunk on his breast. Oliver could not tell whether he was asleep; and his body looked so lifeless, so grey and bloodless in the frame of his easy chair, that Robert, looking over Necker's shoulder, did not even know whether he was alive. But his guide did not seem to be in any doubt, and turning round, put a finger to his lips, obviously with the object of calling attention to the hermit's noisy sandals. The dog Tristan at Louis' feet continued to snarl. Robert stood still.

"Oliver," said the King suddenly, without stirring or opening his eyes, "do you know what an evil night this has been? Have you betrayed me, brother, for the second time?"

Silence reigned. Only the muffled sound of the night owls hooting penetrated the library from the aviary outside. Oliver stood quite still and the interval between Louis' question and his reply was to him so full of peace that he nodded with apparent approval and confidence at his stillness, as a teacher nods to a good pupil. Once more he turned round and smiled. The saint's chin was quivering and his hands were trembling in the sleeves of his frock. Looking once more at the sick man, Oliver asked in reply:

"Treachery, Sire? How could I say 'Yes,' when you yourself have called him? But how can I say 'No,' either? Let things come, Sire, as they may."

Louis groaned. Oliver raised his voice:

"Father Robert of Tarentum stands behind me."

"Yes, yes," said the King, as if he knew it. Now for the first time he opened his eyes and laid a hand against the left side of his face. The other hand stretched forth two fingers, it was the sign for Necker to hide behind the panelling. Smiling at the hermit, Oliver went out and, through a side door in the panelling over which hung a piece of Gobelin tapestry with an invisible opening, he entered the room again close by the King's chair. And there he remained standing.

Robert had not stirred from his place. The uncanny relationship which, like a spider's web, bound the King and the

Devil together, uniting their bodies, their souls and their words, filled him with unreasoning fear. But, as often happens with men of a violent and self-reliant nature, reckless daring lay close behind this fear, and needed only a spark to leap into flame. For the sake of the divine honour which he represented, he felt he must act. When the Evil One had smiled at him a second time, the paralysing fear of being cursed was overcome by the counteracting pressure of hostility or friendship — he did not pretend to know which. He remained standing in his corner because he was not sure whether the King's open eye had seen him or not, and he felt safer at a distance. But when the King's weak voice called him, he no longer felt afraid.

"Come closer, Father Robert."

He stepped forward and the noise of his sandals on the tiled floor was louder than any sound he had heard since he had entered the room. Bending forward he tried to deaden the thud of his footsteps, but as he did not succeed, he gathered that God desired to step noisily into this sphere and proceeded to thunder through the room. The King jerked his shoulder nervously. Three paces away from the arm-chair the monk halted and raised his hand in greeting or blessing. Louis, who did not take his eyes off him, crossed himself. The dog snarled louder than ever.

"Quiet, Tristan!" the King commanded and was silent again. Robert became uneasy. He felt he must speak. He felt that he must call out the name of the Almighty in this evil silence, for the sick man's sake as well as his own. For was he not there above all to cleanse and uplift? He felt he must cry out God's name, as though it were an anchor cast out to find solid ground beyond these hellish depths of deception. He exclaimed much too loudly:

"The Lord is Almighty! The Lord is goodness, the Lord is salvation!"

Once again Louis' shoulder twitched as if the sharp voice stung him. He asked wearily:

"Do you think you can help me like that, Father?"

"Yes," replied Robert, pleased by the humility of the words and uplifted by the sight of the prey he was about to drag forth from the cave of evil before the throne of an appreciative deity.

As in all the happy moments of his life — the moments which preceded his storming of the souls of men — he felt the red stream of his blood rushing pleasantly and as it were with a cruel charm through his body, and was filled with that peculiar and certainly pious wrath which is never very far removed from a desire to administer corporal punishment to the sinner, and sometimes even does so. But now the magnitude and danger of the task confronting him doubled the force of these turgid emotions of wrath and pleasure. Though he was not insensible to the strange and wonderful features of the situation, his holy Yea had not kindled the flame of hope in the King; it had not even filled him with the mild glow of resignation, nor lighted the smallest spark of spiritual improvement. He remained lifeless and timid, and only asked:

“What is the price, my Father?”

“The price is the Evil One,” roared the hermit, “that Devil-possessed accursed creature who borrows his name from Satan and the breath of life as well, and yet remains at your side, speaks in your name and inflames heaven and earth against you. If you abandon him, God will bless you and save your body from the claws of the sickness which his wrath has sent upon you, and you will live a long evening of serene old age. But if you do not send him away, stricken though you are, God will strike you again, in every limb, in every sense, strike you in death and in damnation!”

The dog snarled, provoked by the saint’s roaring voice and gestures.

“Quiet, Tristan,” the King commanded with an effort. He had not stirred, but merely closed his eyes beneath the avalanche of words. But now the hand over his face moved, and he muttered:

“I shall not send away my good brother.”

Choking with rage, Robert shook his fists, and broke forth again into a torrent of words, drawing terrible pictures of pain and death, of the torture of unhallowed death and the hell beyond. Intoxicated by the rising tide of his own eloquence, he began to attack the state of affairs, conjuring up fantastic images of the realm in revolution, decay and decline. Then changing his tone, he plunged once more into the torrent of pious exhortation,

telling of the blessings of peace, the happiness of a country soothed and quiet, the love of a contented people.

"I shall not send away my good brother," Louis muttered, disturbed by the agitation which had filled his body ever since Oliver left for Tours, and which was now increased by the violence of his blood pressure. The saint's words were as dangerous as stones cast at him. The latter had now reached the height of his peroration and was threatening damnation. . . .

". . . and stricken though you are, God will strike you down this very night," he yelled. But he was interrupted by a voice from the wall louder even than his own:

"That is enough!"

Robert started, with his head thrown back as though the three words had been so many blows on his skull. The King too dropped the hand from his face, which was white as milk with fear, as though he knew not to whom the voice belonged. Or was it the treacherous blood, which, lying in ambush all day, rushed out like a beast of prey at night as it knew only too well how to do, and struck out?

"A miracle!" he groaned, choking, and threw up his arms, hemmed in on all sides by his horror of the menace hanging over him and knowing no loophole of escape from the fists that were raised against him. "Oh, for a miracle! . . . Help! . . ."

The hermit raised himself to his full height. It could not be the voice of God, because it had interrupted his righteous labours. It must therefore be the voice of the Devil, and must be resisted. And lo; the arras was parted and the Evil One was entering. But had not the King cried out for God's miracle and had not the miracle already been accomplished? Now he must . . .

He flung himself at Oliver, raising his cross like a battle axe, and cried:

"*Apaga, apaga* — God grant us a miracle!"

The dog behind him jumped up barking furiously. . . . He felt a terrible pain in his thigh . . . and in a moment fell senseless into the depths.

Springing forward, Necker tore the dog away and leapt across the hermit in the direction of the arm-chair. With his hand hanging loosely from the strap, the King had fallen forward, his face as red as blood.

It was almost dawn on the last day of September. Oliver was cowering beside Louis, whose face had grown white and still, waiting for him to awake and for the renewal of this struggle without end. Yet how was it that miraculous feelings of peace still filled his breast? How had they converted his emotion over the King's fidelity into the purest of human joys? And why could he not shake off a feeling of almost childish happiness as though he were nearing his journey's end?

Without any transition from stillness to life, without any warning that he was about to awake, Louis' lips moved, at first noiselessly and then gently and more plainly:

"The oil . . . The sacred oil . . . Quick brother, quick, that I may anoint you!"

Necker felt as if his body had become light as air and that his heart no longer beat. Yet it was not pain but the sudden burgeoning of joy and love and a surging torrent of gratitude. He touched Louis' brow with his lips.

"It is the hour of parting," was the joyful thought that filled his being.

"The oil," the whispering voice insisted. "The King may not die!"

"Not the King but *le Mauvais* dies," Oliver said with a smile as he rose and took the ampulla from the praying stool. He pressed it against Louis' strengthless fingers.

"I cannot hold it," the voice complained.

"A word is enough to anoint me," said Oliver soothingly, and laid the ampulla gently on the King's heart.

"The King is going to his eternal home in you, my brother," gasped the voice solemnly, and Necker whispered into the King's mouth:

"And Oliver is going to his eternal rest in you, my brother."

He kissed the parted lips. Then he began to talk in the ringing tones with which the King had been wont to speak when he was well, filling the dark room with the vibrations of his words, which were full of the clear and courageous vitality characteristic of Louis' melodious voice of old. He discussed future policy, and the measures to be taken to ensure peace: Brittany, the only independent duchy in the kingdom, was not to be disturbed, but would have to be won by means of the bloodless victory of wise diplomatic dealings between the two reigning houses. No fresh

war for the sake of Calais was to be undertaken against England, but efforts were to be made to secure the town by means of money. The foreign policy already adopted with regard to other countries was to be continued and the taxation of the people gradually lightened. The future greatness and might of France seemed assured.

"Great and mighty is the King," gasped the voice and the breathing grew more difficult. Without interrupting what he was saying, Oliver quietly got up and pulled a small bell rope which was concealed from view. His words grew ever more passionate as they ceased to deal with stern considerations of state and turned to the animals. He uttered the beloved names, joked with the cranes and owls, lured the dogs to his side, and patted the noble necks of the horses.

"The dear animals," repeated the croaking voice.

The door opened quietly. A glance sufficed to inform Jean de Beaune what was wanted, and he quickly vanished.

"We must have more animals," Oliver declared a little hastily now as he wiped the cold sweat from Louis' brow. "We shall have to send everywhere for dogs. We must make enquiries in Spain about mastiffs, greyhounds and Valencian griffons. Mules can be obtained from Sicily, and in the Barbary States there is a kind of small wolf called addib . . ."

But the private chaplain had arrived at the death-bed.

Chapter 4

THE GALLOWS

SOON after Louis' death the Queen arrived with the Dauphin. She came in response to a summons from Oliver, who had sent an express messenger to her. She had informed no one in her own residence of the King's demise, nor had she told her daughters, her Bourbon kinsmen, or other state officials. Jean de Beaune received her with a grave face and conducted her past the cold and silent Scottish Guards through the cold and silent rooms to the death chamber. Louis was lying white and peaceful on his pillows. Death had freed his face of distortion as though a charmed and kindly hand had smoothed it, and only by a very close scrutiny could the traces of the first heavy blow of the great fist on the left side be discerned. Necker was sitting on a low stool at the head of the bed, and was bent so far forward that his face was lower than that of the dead man. It almost seemed as if he were still listening for the beat of the King's heart; for he had sat thus for many hours, holding in his lap the mirror, the sudden bright surface of which had announced the victory of death. From his lower level he was examining the face of the King, and so deeply impressed was he by the last expression it bore, or perhaps so conscious still of his proximity to the departed spirit, that his own face, though somewhat more cheerful, seemed to reflect the pallid peace of the dead.

Charlotte remained standing in the doorway, riveted to the spot by a certain fear. In the flickering light of the candles she could not discern the face of the dead from the face of the living, or tell which was the King and which was Necker. But soon Oliver turned towards her and, standing up, bowed with a kindly smile.

"Messire . . ." said Charlotte gently, raising her voice as if to ask a timid question. "I cannot believe it. . . ." And suddenly looking at Louis and then again at Necker, she put the direct question: "Who wears the crown here?"

Oliver looked at her in surprise and raised a hand in protest.

"You, Madam," he said, and retreated into the dark background of the room where Jean de Beaune was standing. Charlotte bowed her head and blushed. Then kneeling by the side of the bed with the Dauphin, a shy unprepossessing boy of fifteen, she said a short prayer. Rising to her feet she turned round thoughtfully and timidly.

"May the Regency count upon you, Messire?" she asked. Oliver approached, again smiling, and shaking his head.

"If it could, Madam," he replied, "then the Regency itself, peace, nay, the very existence of the state, and the work of this great man, would be of painfully short duration. Is it possible that you really do not know this, exalted lady?"

Charlotte was silent and pressed the palms of her hands together, a characteristic gesture when she was unable to control the agitation either within or about her. Necker examined her. Age had improved her. Her prematurely white hair had softened all the ugliness, coarseness and sorrow in her face, and added dignity to it. It had grown smaller and the broad features which in the past had seemed too big and strangely bare had been toned down and, as it were, clothed by the silvery twilight of age.

"And what will you do, Messire?" she asked at last, betraying through the distress in her voice that this question, like the first, had been hard to utter but would not be suppressed.

"Madam," Necker answered slowly, "you once saw me at close quarters — I once revealed myself to you plainly, in a way that seldom happens in a lifetime. And yet would you tell me, exalted lady, that you really do not know what I am going to do?"

Charlotte gave a barely perceptible nod.

"Follow him," she said softly, and with more assurance, encouraged by his gentle way of insisting on frankness, "at least that is what I suspected, Messire, when the outcry against your accursed name penetrated even to my peaceful abode. I at least knew the greatness that lay behind this outcry, and possibly, Messire, this knowledge is one of the few things of which I am proud. And when I heard it I prayed to God to forgive you and bless you. And I have . . . yes, seigneur, I never believed that I should ever see you — alone — without him — after him. So perhaps I may be allowed to be a little confused now . . ."

Oliver made a movement as though to seize her hand. But as the Dauphin was standing close behind his mother and seemed to be gazing fixedly at him with a certain vague expression of irresolute attraction, he refrained.

"Once again, gracious lady, you are placing yourself very close to me," he said with grateful emotion, "and you can guess why I am still alive although my King has been dead five hours, why I begged you so secretly to come to me, and why it is you and not I who will have to announce the death of the sovereign and the establishment of the Regency. You must announce not only this but also the dismissal of the Devil."

Charlotte lifted her shoulder a little as though she were adjusting a burden, and her lips quivered.

"Now at last I know," she murmured. Then she added in deep distress: "Oh why are the tasks you set me always so difficult, Messire?"

"Because, Madam, they are always dictated by the King's spirit," Necker replied with his gentle smile. "Now, as once before, it is a question of the dynasty; now, as then, it means the conquest of a feeling. The hatred which has gathered about the Crown, which this great man was able to bear, but which would crush this tender youth, must be exterminated by him who aroused it, in the name of the King. And that is why I did not desert by one of the many secret ways of escape which stood open to me, and did not smuggle myself into death with the King. That is why I have been preparing everything for many years, and why it is your duty, your Majesty, to-day, just as it was then, to carry out the royal wishes and not interfere with the natural course of events by obtruding your private feelings."

"Yes," Charlotte murmured. Oliver continued in friendly but matter-of-fact tones:

"The first official act of the Regency, after announcing the death of the King, must be my own dismissal from office. The second, the reinstatement of President Le Boulanger, and of the other parliamentarians in their offices and dignities and the return of their property. The third is the issue of a public order to the Supreme Court to put Oliver Necker and Daniel Bart on trial and to carry this out with a great display of judicial pomp and ceremony to the bitter end. The fourth is to sign the final sentence without a moment's delay. I shall spare you the pain

of making the arrest, most gracious lady, that is all. And now promise me, by the King, that you will do all this."

Charlotte stood bewildered, and raised her hands in feeble protest.

"My God!" she groaned.

"Madam," cried Jean de Beaune in tones of deep emotion from the shadowy depths of the room, "for God's sake, think it over first. . . ."

"Stop, Jean, my good friend," Oliver interrupted in a loud voice, "even if you wish to destroy the peace of the state, I cannot allow you to destroy the peace of the soul; you are wise, my friend, you must surely understand me."

Beaune was silent. Necker turned once more to the Queen.

"The man who has just spoken," he said, "is Louis' most valuable legacy to the Regency. You can always listen to him with safety, except now."

With a flushed face the Dauphin exclaimed:

"Don't promise anything, mother!"

"Sire!" said Oliver, gazing intently at him, "do you know what your people call me?"

"Yes, my lord," stammered the Prince, and Oliver saw his large nose twitch with excitement just as the big nose of Charles of France, whose name he bore, had once twitched. His brow clouded as though he could discern alarming signs for the future of the state.

"So listen to the voice of the people, Sire," he said, in tones that were none too friendly. "It isn't altogether unimportant to do so, when you are not Louis but Louis' son."

Veering round, he stepped up to the dead man and kissed the two hands which were crossed over his breast. Then he slipped the sheet over him and turned away.

"We are no longer necessary here, Madam," he said to the Queen. "Your great duty begins with that promise you made me."

"I promise you, in the name of your King," said Charlotte in loud clear tones; and when Oliver bowed his head over her fingers, she took his hand and kissed it.

"That is for my King," said Oliver gently, "and he thanks you."

Suddenly the Dauphin burst into tears. No one could tell

why, for his face was turned to the floor and when he looked up again with his squinting, red-rimmed eyes, Necker had vanished. The boy raised his finger and listened as though they might still perhaps be able to hear him.

"Yes," said Charlotte, "we have no King."

THE magistrate of the City of Paris had experienced great difficulty during the last week in preventing civil war between the people and the tyrant of St. Cloud. Like the Parliament and the leaders of the Church, he had been kept well informed by secret agents concerning the condition of the King, and was able definitely to promise the burghers, whose patience was exhausted, that the state of affairs, which from the point of view of justice and morality could no longer be tolerated, would soon undergo a complete transformation, and that if they held themselves in check but a little while longer, their patience would be rewarded. Moreover, the tale which had set the indignation of the city aflame had not yet been definitely proved to the corporation. Rumour had it that the wife of a certain noble, whom for some whim Bart had imprisoned in the castle tower of St. Cloud, had begged the lieutenant on her knees to set her husband at liberty. As she was both young and pretty, Bart had not been sparing in his coarse attentions, and had at last promised that if she would spend the night with him she would find her husband outside the tower the next morning. The lady, whose love for her husband was very great, finally determined to take her fate in her own hands and at dawn on the following day Bart conducted her to the foot of the tower.

"But where is he?" she cried. With a burst of brutal laughter, Bart replied:

"He is already stepping down from heaven, sweet lady!" Whereupon she saw two legs dangling over her head, and the lifeless body of her strangled husband with a rope round his neck being slowly lowered from the second floor to the ground and at last lying in a piteous heap at her feet. This tale of crime, which was repeated by one citizen to another in the streets of Paris with the addition of the most gruesome details, filled the cup of public wrath to the brim. Stormy gatherings were held, at which loud curses and threats were uttered against the Devil

and his lieutenant. The Prior of the Franciscan monastery, the famous preacher, Father Antoine Fradin, who, though he had long since joined the ranks of those who inveighed against the tyranny of the all-powerful minister and his minion, had been the only one to escape unpunished, was attracting large crowds. The magistrate was obliged to call out the troops, and the Archbishop requested the Prior to moderate his zeal and avoid inciting the anger of the mob. For although the Parliament would have been glad of proofs of an outrageous capital crime on the part of Bart, murder being still missing from the catalogue of his misdeeds, no woman who had been robbed of her husband in the terrible manner related had come to lodge a complaint, and later on among the counts against Necker at his trial this case was not mentioned.

"It is such a long way," observed Necker to Daniel Bart, as he arrived after nightfall at St. Cloud. The lieutenant thrust out his chin as though he were trying quickly to conceal the expression of his face.

"It is high time, Master," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "it is high time for us to go if you really think it better to surrender and to allow yourself to be hanged than to remain quietly here until they come and kill us. And yet I understand you better than Fradin does. He thinks you are mad and solves his own problems quite neatly by this explanation. If we are not at the Parliament House before Paris hears of the death of the King, the Supreme Court will not have a button of our coats left to decorate their gallows with."

"I don't think much of your jokes, Daniel," Oliver rejoined slowly. "But I understand. So just make a dash for it with your men across the frontier of Brittany and then over to England or Portugal, where good fighting limbs are well paid. It will answer my purpose just as well for you to be sentenced *in contumaciam*."

"We must be off in two hours, Master," said Bart, as if he had not been listening. Oliver pressed his hand and went to rest for a little while. Daniel summoned his bodyguard, a handful of adventurers and ne'er-do-weels from every quarter of Europe, paid to each man a year's salary and, making them form a small company, dispatched them in a westerly direction. His farewell speech was:

"Hurry up and clear out of the country, you jail birds. The King is dead!"

The town, accustomed to noise at night, merely sunk more deeply into sleep. But when on the following morning it summoned up courage to wake, nothing was left of the bullies except the words with which the sun rose—The King is dead!

OLIVER and Daniel, dressed as two travelling merchants and wearing false beards, were already in Paris. Having squeezed themselves between two fragrant carts of fruit and succeeded in passing the gate unmolested, they were in this peaceful company not even challenged by the two sleepy watchmen. Thus they passed along the empty streets, which were still moist and grey in the mists of dawn.

"Has this life been good, Daniel?" Oliver asked. Bart shrugged his shoulders dubiously.

"Yes," he said at last, "it was very pleasant towards the end, at least from my point of view, which I acknowledge is no criterion. But when one is able to step out freely for the last time, as you and I are doing now, Master, one would have to be ungrateful indeed not to acknowledge that it has been good, and you at any rate have been somebody, Master."

"I have been half a King, Daniel," said Oliver with a slow smile, "and this one-eyed view from the throne gives one an extraordinary idea of life. Because Louis through me became half Necker, being, like me, gifted for kingship, mistaken by many for me and confusing himself with me—a complete separation of perspectives gradually became necessary. For I loved him, Daniel, and I helped him, the man, to die. And it was difficult, that promise to maintain his kingship alive. Thus I have separated the Devil from the Crown and hold Necker up as concrete symbol to the world. And now with my own two eyes as Necker I have to take the clearest view of the face of death which it is possible to take, the view from the standpoint of the gallows. And so, with all this terrible, difficult hovering hither and thither, from half to whole and from whole to half, with all this moonlike wandering of the soul, I have lost all knowledge of the human valuation of life. That is why I ask you, Daniel, and I think you are right."

"Yes, yes," Bart nodded and looked shyly at his Master. Oliver halted.

"My brain is not diseased, Daniel," he said gravely. "I do not believe I have ever been more clear-headed than I am now. It is only my words which startled you; but for the moment I know of no simpler ones. My fate is not simple!"

They went on in silence. At the corner of the Rue de la Barillerie, when they were already under the shadow of the Parliament House, Necker said softly:

"There is yet time, my friend. Turn back! My life has consumed enough lives and enough love. Why should my death do likewise? Yes," he cried, and stopped again, "life was very beautiful, Daniel, for it knew also of love, a strange love, a powerful love which could cancel out the hatred of the whole world! Claes and Eliza, Louisa and Anne — Anne and Louis — and you, my friend, for over thirty years my shoulder and my fist! Thank you, Daniel. Turn back, there is yet time!"

Bart was already five paces ahead.

"Come along, Master," he said over his shoulder, "it will soon be six o'clock."

In the shadow of the Parliament gate they removed their false beards and, tearing them into little bits, flung them into the gutter. The gate was still locked. They rang for the guard. When he opened the gate he scrutinised their features, but did not know them. Oliver asked to see the parliamentary actuary on pressing business. When the heavy gate was locked behind them, Daniel started in alarm. Necker looked into his face, which had grown pale.

"There is yet time, friend," he whispered. But all Bart replied with a forced smile, was:

"I will try to think a great deal of the mistress now."

They walked through the gate-house to the guard-room, in which only a dim light was burning. Soldiers of the guard were lying about or sitting on their plank beds. The officer, drunk with sleep, enquired their names and rank.

"The King's secret service," replied Necker, showing an unpretentious looking medal: "let the actuary be roused." The officer shook himself and woke up. He despatched a messenger to carry out the command and took a wax torch from the wall with the object of conducting the two strangers into the Parlia-

ment House. As he turned round and held the light with some curiosity over his visitors, he stepped back horrified at the sight of Bart. But controlling himself, he led them in silence to the actuary's room. When he returned he called out to his men:

"By all the saints, the big one was the hound of hell and the other perhaps the Devil himself. Well, we are seeing something. Get up, you louts!"

Being an officer with a sense of responsibility, he noiselessly collected all the troops of the Palais de Justice, strengthened the guard at the gate, giving them instructions to exercise increased vigilance, and had the room in which the suspects were sitting watched by a body of guards.

"Now it is too late to go to Portugal," said Oliver with a fleeting smile, almost before the officer had shut the door behind him. "They have already recognised you, Daniel. Your popularity is greater than that of the Devil."

Bart made a gesture of contempt and changed the subject.

"Does the blood-curdling tale about the nobleman's wife whom I am supposed to have violated by a trick and before whose eyes I suspended the corpse of the husband I had murdered emanate from you, Master? Fradin repudiates the authorship with pious disdain, although it is worthy of his fertile brain. But for Paris this is the last straw as far as I am concerned."

"I know nothing about it," Oliver replied cheerfully, "and it savours so much of the dramatic atmosphere of a ballad that I should think it is most likely a fabrication of the gutter. They are making a mythical hero of you, Daniel. Perhaps I too . . ."

The actuary entered hurriedly and his nervous look proved that he had already been informed regarding the unexpected visitors. He knew Bart but not Necker, and dared do no more than cast a quick glance with his short-sighted half-closed eyes at the broad-shouldered giant; then mumbling something with his pale lips, he took refuge at his desk.

"Take down a protocol of what I am going to tell you," the smaller of the two men, who had grey hair, commanded. The fact that he spoke with authority and that the hound of hell stood dumb and devoted at his side made the pen in the actuary's hand tremble.

"Write down," continued the grey-haired man: "'I, Oliver Necker of Ghent, Sieur le Mauvais . . .'"

The pen fell sideways like the mast of an overturned boat, and the actuary's face grew grey.

"Is this a joke? . . ." he stammered. Oliver smiled gently.

"You will have time and opportunity enough to prove my depositions, sir," he replied. "Just write: — 'Sieur le Mauvais, Count of Meulan, Seigneur de Crone, Rouvray, Senart, Governor of St. Cloud, Warden of Choisy, Provost Marshal of France and Minister of the King, accompanied by my lieutenant, Daniel Bart of Ghent —' Write, sir," he repeated, interrupting himself as he noticed the pen was hesitating again, "— 'do hereby declare to the officers of the Court of Parliament and would have them to know that the Lord of us all, His Most Christian Majesty, Louis of Valois, is dead' —"

The pen fell on the parchment as if it were burning the fingers of the writer, and the actuary sprang up with his mouth open.

"Go on writing," Necker again commanded. The actuary crept back to his desk. His face was almost yellow.

"— 'is dead, having died early yesterday, the 30th day of September, in the arms of the Holy Catholic Church. Wherefore, I, Oliver Necker, surrender myself, my person and my property and my lieutenant Daniel Bart, and his person and his property, without reserve to the power of the Supreme Court and hand myself over together with him, into the hands of its lofty and unimpeachable justice. . . .'"

UNTIL the news of the King's death was confirmed, consternation reigned in the Parliament. Certain of the councillors suspected some new terrible and incomprehensible trick on the part of the Devil, the object of which it was impossible to guess, but which probably aimed at putting an end to the rule of justice altogether; and these strongly urged the advisability of bowing the undesirable couple out again. But the majority — particularly after the Promotor had had an hour's interview with le Mauvais, considered there was but little opportunity for intrigue or for an attack on the parliamentary body behind the unconditional and judicially complete surrender of the two men. In the confusion of the moment, however, they were at a loss to

know what to do with them without injury to the Court of Justice. Finally they decided to take them under a sort of chivalrous protection until further news arrived from the King's representatives. Whereupon a few well-guarded rooms, in which they were able to move about as they chose, were placed at their disposal.

"For the time being the gallows seem to have feet of velvet," observed Bart to Necker.

But this state of indecision lasted only until the evening of the same day. The express messengers whom the Parliament despatched to Plessis met the couriers coming from the Regency on the road to Orleans only a few miles south of the city. The official news of the King's death, and of the establishment of the Regency, and, above all, the first three decrees of the new Government, burst upon the Parliament with a significance big with fate, which at first found them incredulous and almost paralysed, but in the end afforded a solution of the problem before them and pointed to action. That night Necker and Bart were conducted in chains by an escort of a hundred heavily armed men, as prisoners of state, to the tower of the Louvre. The Governor of the castle, Sieur de Saint-Venant, was informed by the Public Prosecutor, an office to which the Parliamentary Promotor had been appointed, that in the event of the prisoners escaping, the same sentence would be passed on him as would have been pronounced on the two men committed to his charge. On the following day, the crier of the Supreme Court announced in all the great squares of the city the death of the King, the establishment of the Regency, the deposition, arrest and trial of le Mauvais, and his lieutenant, and the reinstatement of President Le Boulanger in office. The two prisoners in the tower heard the people shouting. They did not understand what it meant, but, curious to know, they enquired of their guard. With some hesitation the answer was brought to them a little later — the people were shouting "Long live the King and death to the Devil!" Oliver smiled.

"There is my whole scheme in a nutshell, Daniel."

"What a God-fearing city!" replied Bart, shaking his head.

THE trial began with every display of harsh and cruel precision on the day after the solemn reinstatement of the old President.

The Archbishop had declined to use the machinery of the inquisition against the Devil, because he wished to spare the memory of the great King. He was content to head the long list of plaintiffs which the Supreme Court, in drawing up its indictment of the state criminals, summoned to appear before it. It took six days to collect the evidence for the prosecution alone, and to distribute it among the various commissions of enquiry. On the seventh day the accused appeared for the first time before the Court, which was assembled in the Grand' Chambre, filling the huge hall with the sombre gloom of their black robes. The scarlet fur-trimmed cap of the Public Prosecutor provided the one note of colour above the raised seats of the plaintiffs. On the President's chair, looming black beneath the ermine and the royal arms, sat old Le Boulanger, and on his vulture head the black and white was repeated in striking contrast to the cap and the hair. The prisoners swore to speak the truth and withhold nothing. Le Mauvais at once declared that he held himself entirely responsible for the actions of his lieutenant. He asked but one favour — that they should not be parted until the day sentence was pronounced.

"Oliver Necker," the President asked, "did you know the decisions of the Regency with regard to yourself when you surrendered to the Court?"

"Yes."

Le Boulanger raised his head in astonishment, and after a moment's pause, continued:

"Did you also know of my rehabilitation?"

"Yes," replied Necker a little uneasily; "but surely, sir, it is not in the interest of either the state or the Regency to continue this form of interrogation, which has no bearing on the case but which my oath compels me to answer?"

The judge, somewhat taken aback, made no reply, and the black robes shuffled uneasily. The prisoners were hastily dismissed and it was decided to avoid as far as possible examining them in public, and to leave the proving of the particular charges brought against them to the Commissions, who would present their protocols to the Court, together with the signatures of the accused, admitting their justice.

The two were not taken back to the Louvre, but placed in a double cell in the Conciergerie. The cells were divided by a

party wall reaching half way up to the ceiling, and the vaulted roof allowed but little light to enter. Though they could not see each other, therefore, they were able to converse. Instead of the light fetters they had worn in the tower of the Louvre, they were now weighed down by iron chains ending in a ring fixed to their left legs. To prevent the ring from falling over the foot, it was suspended by another chain which hung from an iron girdle tightly fitted about their loins and lying heavily on their hips.

"The gentlemen are making sure of their torture anyhow," blustered Daniel in Flemish over the wall.

"If only I can endure it," said Necker.

For three months the procession of plaintiffs passed before the Court, an endless chain of Bishops, Abbots, monks, officials, burghers, peasants, widows and guardians of children. The evidence for the prosecution collected at these secret sessions was merely the crescendo in an increasingly confused symphony of hatred and acquisitiveness. Half a city and whole villages sometimes demanded compensation for damage they claimed to have suffered. There was not a man who had had a field destroyed by hail, or a cow die, who did not ascribe his misfortune to the Devil and come to lodge his complaint. The Court was not in a position, nor had it the courage, to sift the bogus claims from the real ones, and was only too well aware of the political importance of the trial; for it was winning the Parliament a popularity which it had never before enjoyed and which might be turned to account in the future. It listened to every complaint. The Commissions worked at feverish speed and every day protocols were sent to the Conciergerie to receive the signatures of the indifferent prisoners, who never uttered a protest. Soon the whole of Necker's vast wealth had been consumed in meeting claims for damages, and it became necessary to encroach upon the City funds. It was only when the Regency, startled by the successful efforts of the Parliament in winning adherents and by its recent presumptuous tone, firmly declined to comply with its request to sell property which had lapsed to the Crown that the Court decided to add no more to the enormous mass of evidence it had collected.

"Give them another Devil to try," cried Bart over the wall, "and the good folk both in town and country will all be

rich. So you see, Master, speculations in heaven do sometimes pay after all."

Receiving no reply he became uneasy. He knew that Necker's delicate frame was threatening to break up under the continued torture of the chain and girdle. He knew that the heavy weight of iron which his own strong body could bear without much discomfort and which made but little impression on his muscles, cut deep into Necker's legs, causing suppurating wounds, and that the loin girdle was such a strain on the lower part of his body that it had given rise to the most alarming internal symptoms. During the last few days Oliver had been able to keep hardly any food down. So great was his weakness that his legs could no longer bear his infirm body and he could only lie on the plank bed, complaining but little, though he often groaned with pain in the night.

"Master," Daniel cried anxiously over the wall. But everything was still.

"Guard, guard!" he roared, and banged the iron panel of his cell with his chain.

Necker was found in deep swoon. The Court surgeon, who had great difficulty in reviving him, could not give him the necessary treatment without removing his irons. But the key belonging to the secret lock of the waist band was kept night and day by the President. When the physician applied to him for permission to remove the irons, he was relieved of his office the same day.

"I must not be allowed to perish here, Daniel," complained Oliver. "The people do not believe in what they have not seen! Oh how miserably Louis' struggle is being repeated!"

He begged that the Franciscan Abbot Fradin might be allowed to visit him. The authorities were astonished, but there was no one whom they could have less objection to his seeing than this notorious opponent. When the warder had closed the door behind him, Father Anthony, deeply moved, bent over the plank bed.

"Master," he murmured, "my good Master, in God's name, what is the meaning of all this?"

Oliver stroked the hands of the Abbot.

"Don't you understand yet, Father Toon?" he asked with

a smile. ". . . Long live the King! Death to the Devil! . . . That is all. I promised him that."

The sound of clanging irons was heard against the party wall. Fradin started back.

"My Daniel!" said Necker, trying to silence him. Then Bart's voice rang in Flemish over the wall:

"Brother Toon, you must try to arrange for the Master to be relieved of his irons. That is the most important thing of all at the present moment!"

"Yes, Fradin," said Oliver, "that is most important. Otherwise the trial will last longer than the accused. And the sentence must be carried out. The people do not believe in what they do not see . . ."

"And if they do not see the Devil hanging from the gallows," Daniel interrupted, "they are apt to see him hanging from the Crown again, and would believe it! Do you understand, Toon, or not?"

"My servant understands me," said Oliver softly, "and you also, my good Toon. Do not ask too many questions. Try to persuade the President to come here. He has got the key and is not allowed to let it go out of his hands. You have a great deal of influence now. Try to use it on my behalf—just once more. But make haste, Toon, for you see how urgent it is. . . ."

He drew the Abbot's head down to his ear so that Bart might not overhear. "In any case they will not be able to hang a whole Devil. . . . He will certainly cheat them of one leg. . . . For I am not mistaken . . . it is gangrene. . . ."

Fradin could not suppress a cry when he saw the leg. He did not answer Daniel's anxious questions but hurried away.

"Have you still got secrets from me, Master?" expostulated Bart from the other side.

"Don't worry about that, Daniel," replied Necker trying to comfort him. "I only wanted to excite his imagination a little."

An hour later the President came alone. He curtly ordered the warder to retire and with a torch in his hand stepped up to the plank bed. The two men looked at each other. Without saying a word, Oliver showed him his body. The judge did not stir.

"Why do you wish me to die here, Seigneur?" Necker enquired. Without a moment's hesitation the President replied:

"Because the Court is afraid you are in possession of secrets which you might divulge."

"The Court fears what you fear, Seigneur. And what you fear are your suspicions regarding my devilry."

Le Boulanger was silent for a moment, then he retorted:

"Were the orders of the Regency your work, Necker?"

Oliver raised his head. "You will be surprised, Seigneur. Those orders were the last wish of the King."

The President retreated a step and the torch in his hand flickered.

"The King ordered you, Necker, to give yourself up?"

"No, he did not do that, Seigneur, but as he lay dying, he delivered into my hands not only the life of the King but the life of the Crown. Now you know my secret. Now you understand my behaviour, President. Now remember the shouts in the street which showed that the people had guessed my secret. And now, sir, you know your duty."

The judge bowed slowly so that the torch in his hand was lowered too. There was a puzzled look in his face, as though he were disturbed by some inner tumult, and his eyes were so full of a secret emotion that though they were wide open they appeared to see nothing. It seemed as though a hand were pressing on his neck and supporting him at the same time, as his head dropped ever lower. And lo! he kissed the hands which lay beside each other on the coarse blanket.

Not a word did he say. Daniel, alarmed by the long silence, broke it with an agonised cry.

"Take his irons off him! For Christ's sake do not hesitate, Seigneur!"

The President drew himself up and gave an embarrassed cough. Then he summoned the warder and the officer on duty. The condition of the prisoner, he said, in his usual rough tones, made any attempt at escape out of the question, and as judge of the Court, he gave him permission to take off the heavy irons. The Archbishop's private Jewish physician was to be fetched. With compressed lips he bent over le Mauvais, threw back the blankets and his shirt and unlocked the girdle about his loins. As two warders lifted his body while two others removed the

irons, Oliver swooned once more. When he recovered consciousness twenty hours later, his left leg had already been amputated.

THE President surprised the Commissions by telling them to conclude their work within a fortnight. In February, the fifth month of the trial, the Supreme Court, consisting of the two presidents and twenty-six parliamentary councillors, met to pass sentence. The reading of the protocols lasted six days. On the nineteenth of February, the conference ended. The Court unanimously condemned Oliver Necker and Daniel Bart for their innumerable misdeeds to be hanged with a rope about their necks and strangled on the gallows of the city of Paris in full view of the people. The following day was spent in a secret discussion of Le Boulanger's unusual demand that the sentence should be carried out without allowing the Regency the opportunity of exercising its prerogative of mercy. The verdict, together with the records of the trial, was to be sent to Amboise, where the Court was in residence, only on the day of the execution. The President, who gave as his reason loss of time, the position of power still held by Jean de Beaune, and the excellent opportunity which such an act provided of asserting the independence the Parliament had so long desired, gained the day.

Early on the morning of the twenty-first of February, the First President, Le Boulanger, the Second President, de la Vacquerie, and the Public Prosecutor, Alligret, repaired to the Conciergerie, and read the sentence to the prisoners.

"Good," said Oliver, who looked like a skeleton hanging between his crutches.

"Excellent!" cried Bart, who was supporting him, and had just cried like a child when he had been taken into an adjoining room and seen the Master again for the first time.

"The Regency," said the President, "declined from the beginning to exercise its prerogative of mercy. Unless any objection is raised, the sentence is valid. Have you any objection to raise?"

Necker looked at him in silence for some seconds. Then he smiled faintly, wondering whether the President could possibly suspect what a terrible ordeal he had spared Charlotte.

"No," he said at last. And then he added gently, "I thank you, Seigneur. All is well. Is not the sun shining to-day?"

Le Boulanger turned hastily away and left the vault without answering. De la Vacquerie and the public prosecutor glanced at each other and followed. Through the door, which had not been closed, Prior Fradin entered, while a second monk of lofty stature remained in the shadow of the entrance.

"Is the sun shining to-day, Father Toon?" Oliver enquired again. The Abbot and Daniel laid him gently on the plank bed.

"Yes," replied the former, "it is like a spring day to-day."

"Good, good!" said Oliver.

"The right weather for a public festival," observed Bart.

"Shall we pray?" Fradin enquired softly.

"Yes," said Daniel, in different tones. Oliver was silent and glanced towards the door.

"Does yet another man of God venture to come to the Devil?"

The Abbot bent to whisper in his ear.

"The Queen's Confessor," he said. The tall monk stepped forward. Oliver gave him a quick, scrutinising glance and exclaimed:

"It was the dog who bit you, Father, not the Devil. Did you know that, too?"

"I know a good deal more, Oliver."

"Do you, too, want to capture my soul, Father?"

"No, Oliver, for I know I could not reach it. But this at least I will see to, that your poor body shall not hang long in the wind, that it shall be covered and buried in spite of the rigour of the law — that is my mission. There is just one favour I would ask for myself — a good word from you, Oliver."

"My brother, too, art thou," said Oliver. The hermit bowed over him and kissed him on the mouth.

At ten o'clock in the morning the two prisoners were conducted to the inner court of the Parliament House and were there delivered up with solemn ceremony by the officials to the hangman. The latter was a kindly man, who lifted the cripple gently into the cart, and in defiance of custom allowed him to sit on the floor of it. And thus it came about that all that could be seen of the Devil was his gaunt, grey-haired head above the side

of the cart. Daniel, with his hands tied behind him, towered like a giant by his side, and supported the Master's shoulders with his knees as the cart drove off.

Surrounded by guards and with a strong escort of cavalry in front and behind, the procession pressed its way through the crowd to the gallows of Montfaucon. The kind-hearted hangman kept close to Oliver and hid him from the sight of the crowd, who, moved by a rare instinct, remained silent. Or perhaps they were disappointed because all they could see between the halberdiers and the heads of the horses was the wild face and broad shoulders of the lieutenant, whom they recognised.

"I expected louder applause," observed Bart. Oliver, with his eyes closed, remained silent. He was probably suffering. Daniel tried to press his legs closer to him to protect him from the jolting of the cart. They said no more.

Suddenly there were yells, roars and shrieks from the crowd at the foot of the hill on which the gallows stood as the Devil was taken out of the cart and lifted up.

"The cloven hoof! On the left the cloven hoof!"

Then there was silence again, broken only by a loud wail of a child or a woman. The crowd started back, blinking at the sky. Oliver was standing at the foot of the ladder, his arms clasped about the necks of two of the Provost's assistants on either side of him, leaning on their shoulders as though they were two friends helping him.

"Kiss me, brother," he said to Daniel. "There are worse people than we on earth. I shall watch you. . . ."

"Oh!" groaned Bart. Whereupon he allowed the hangman to lead him to his ladder, and ran up it fairly fast, with one shoulder touching the rungs. Turning round, he saw the Master's eye upon him. He was still smiling when the sack fell over his head, and in a moment his legs were swinging in the air, where he hung as if he were kneeling.

The kindly hangman asked the Devil to climb on his back, and carried him carefully up the ladder. Over his shoulders Oliver reached out to the rungs. How strange it must look, he thought. The sack, which smelt of earth, shut out the world from his eyes. For a moment he wanted to cry out and seize hold of . . . life. His body quivered in one last terrible

thrill. . . . The kindly hangman gave a jerk to his leg, which broke his neck.

The people remained silent, filled with a strange horror. Nobody stirred. Night fell. The crowd dispersed, but straggled back on the following morning. A curious thing had happened. The lieutenant alone was hanging in the fresh breeze. Uncertain how to explain it, the crowd became uneasy. The Devil had gone either into hell or else into mankind.

A Note
on the Type in which
this Book is set

The type in which this book has been set (on the Lino-type) is based on the design of Caslon. It is generally conceded that William Caslon (1692-1766) brought the old-style letter to its highest perfection and while certain modifications have been introduced to meet changing printing conditions, the basic design of the Caslon letters has never been improved. The type selected for this book is a modern adaptation rather than an exact copy of the original. Caslon letters are noted for their extreme legibility.



SET UP, ELECTROTYPED, PRINTED
AND BOUND BY
THE PLIMPTON PRESS, NORWOOD, MASS.
PAPER FURNISHED BY
W. F. ETHERINGTON & CO., NEW YORK

